

**UNPUBLISHED MARICHJHAPI: TRANSLATED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

Translated from the original by
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A few words on Aprakashito Marichjhapi

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

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

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

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

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

Shailen Mukherjee wrote a criticism of the book on Marichjhapi by Jagadishchandra Mondal. He did so under the pseudonym of Jhinuk Mukherjee.

The Publishers and Booksellers Guild banned the criticism in the Pustak Mela of 2002. Shailen has taken the next step and thrown light on the banned composition in ‘Item Marichjhapi’.

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

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

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

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

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

We have used Niranjana Haldar’s interview – he is a journalist, human rights activist and a tireless worker for the betterment of the oppressed.

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

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

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

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

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

Tushar Bhattacharya

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

(Swadhinotar Boli)

Freedom's Sacrifice

Let us go to the refugee fair at Marichjhapi

The bend in the river

Is mooned over by the masses of the country

Let us go to the refugee fair at Marichjhapi.

The police keeps watch

Upon launches all around the coast

And as the people sing revolution

The State smashes our boats.

Snakes, tigers and animals of the wilderness

Helped us conquer our fears

But now we are only afraid of the Basu government.

Let us go to the refugee fair at Marichjhapi.

Bardhaman is torn apart with bullets

And so is the river flowing beside Sandeshkhali

The great dictum of freedom rings

And torrents of blood flow wildly.

Is there any soul left in this country

The refugees walk in their graves,

Is there any soul left in Bengal

The refugees make a home in these graves.

Let us go to the refugee fair

At Marichjhapi.

Face to Face with Marichjhapi

Tushar Bhattacharya

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

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

The British had a hint about the revolutionary nature of Bengalis. This made them aim at exterminating Bengalis altogether. An appropriate reflection of this sentiment can be found in the incidents that took place in Marichjhapi, Singur and

Nandigram. Who is responsible for contributing the building blocks to a culture and its aesthetic sensibilities? There is a famous poem by Bertolt Brecht that may be used as a suitable reply:

Who were the ones to build those seven gates of Thebes?

The pages of history are riddled with the names of Kings.

But the men who heaved those boulders so high

Are they counted as Kings?

We have tried defining them with different titles throughout West Bengal and India – Dalit, Harijan, Namashudra – in order to establish the profit-making business of politics. We have always been afraid of acknowledging workers as the creators and craftsmen of civilization. We belonged to the ‘babu class’ at one point of time in the past, gradually we transformed into the ‘educated middle-class gentleman’. Jaya Chatterjee has rightly explained in her research book – “The middle-class gentleman is exactly the opposite of the senseless and emotionless sons of the soil. This middle-class gentleman, also known as ‘babu’, considers his existence as inevitably more refined than that of the workers since he does not have to engage physically in hard labor.” Jaya Chatterjee quotes Broomfield as saying – “Broomfield uses the word ‘gentleman’ to denote a person who has a ‘westernized pattern of thinking and is an exponent of the most refined class of human beings’. Broomfield considers them to belong to the ‘Weberian group’ as they also exhibit its traits.” They are now being identified as the well-educated middle-class intellectuals.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Satish Mondal, the refugee leader, along with a group of representatives met the Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu, in 1977 at Writer's. In a meeting that span over two days, the Chief Minister assured the leader and his team, after which they returned to Dandakaranya. The next step was to organize the refugees, which they did under the call of 'Chalo Sundarban'. The entire history of Marichjhapi can be found from between the end of March 1978 to 16th May 1979. There are countless journalists and human rights activists who have been witness to this history. Many well-known artists such as Suchitra Mitra and Hemanta Mukhopadhyay have performed in front of audiences in order to raise funds. Sunil Ganguly, Jyotirmoy Dutta (journalist) and the youth leader of the refugees Debabrata Biswas had walked up to Satish Mondal and handed over twenty thousand rupees for the cause. The ones who had seen their dreams come to life – seen them die of hunger and bullets – should have written down this history. They were chased away remorselessly. And we really did not want to dig in whatever chanced afterwards. We never tried searching for them again. The people who could have written their history, could have inquired about the whereabouts of the lost ones were all:

'Favored by His Highness

The royal poet pens his drama

Undone in the darkness of the stage

Bewails unfortunate Shakuntala.'

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

... "Conspiracies or instigations have nothing to do with what's really responsible. It is the simple desire for a healthy life and the will to do away with unbearable living conditions. If the government compels the refugees to leave the land regardless of these aspects, then it clearly demonstrates that there is no real

difference between a Congress government and a Communist one. It is as if both sides would heave a sigh of relief if they are rid of this burden from their shoulders.”

I don't fall in the category of a writer, poet, litterateur or researcher. I simply create documentaries. And it is through this that I made the acquaintance of Shailen Chakraborty. The year was 2002 and the venue was Kolkata International Book Fair. I distinctly remember to have met him and also discovered that his criticism on the book Marichjhapi Naishabder Antaraley written by Jagadishchandra Mondal had been published in the official magazine of the Publishers and Booksellers Guild, Pustak Mela under the pseudonym of 'Jhinuk Chakraborty'. The criticism had probably managed to rile up some influential people. Soon after, the criticism disappeared completely, and a criticism on a new book took its place. I made up my mind to create a documentary on Marichjhapi. I did not have the technical expertise that was required to make the documentary. I started preparing for it in 2005. I realized that it was essential to establish contact with someone who belonged to Marichjhapi in the first place. It is also evident that all such people resided in India, so it would not have been much of a problem if a search were conducted thoroughly.

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

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

When I began searching for facts on Marichjhapi, my target was making a documentary. I had no intention of writing a book. It was aired for the first time on 24th July 2008; however, I learnt soon after that the name 'Marichjhapi' was

unfamiliar to a large section of the people. I had been able to collect so much information on Marichjhapi back then that I could have easily penned down a thousand-page book. It is impossible to incorporate each and every detail in a documentary. It is attractive because we can directly view it and get to know more about what is being shown. We are also brought face to face with the survivors of the ordeal. Moreover, the narrative of a documentary is universally acceptable.

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

The editor of Dainik Statesman, Manas Ghosh, requested me to submit an article on Marichjhapi for the newspaper. He had also fixed a date for submission of the article. I had no option other than penning the article. But the problem was that I am not a man who is particularly fond of writing. I was able to write it nevertheless, and soon after it was published, I began receiving telephone calls from all over the country. The article was republished in many newspapers and magazines. It was noticeable that people started writing on Marichjhapi when the masses took an active interest in it. To my disappointment, I noticed that most of whatever appeared in print on this topic was replete with factual errors. That was the first time I felt the need to write a book on Marichjhapi in Bengali. Moreover, I also felt that it was necessary to answer certain questions that had surfaced in the meanwhile. It should be noted that there are a lot of things on Marichjhapi that still await proper research.

The journalists and sympathizers who witnessed refugees being driven away by force three decades earlier has written a lot on the ordeal of the survivors. Those articles and essays have reached a large section of the people. But it is very

important to learn what the survivors themselves have to say, it is important to understand what they are thinking and how they have viewed the entire episode as it unfolded one step at a time. I had worked on the documentary for three years; starting from 2005 and going all the way to 2008. However, it was not possible to put a halt to my work on Marichjhapi after that. I had to go to Dandakaranya, after the completion of my documentary, to meet many survivors whom I did not have the opportunity to meet before.

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

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

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

‘Mana’ is the daughter of the late Rangalal Goldar, a refugee leader from Marichjhapi. She was born in the Mana camp of Raipur and that was how her name stuck. Mana’s husband, Ananda Sarkar, was unemployed. Their daughter could not afford to go to school. She is sewing blouses at her home as a means of subsistence. Her mother had gone to the neighbor’s for some milk and sugar; she did not want to miss the chance of being hospitable to us. Their dwelling was made of mud. We crossed the small opening in front of the house and entered the hut. The roof was low and made of straw; we had to bend our heads while going in. I sat on a small stool and began my interviews with Mana and Ananda Sarkar. It was followed by the interview of Mana’s two brothers. One of the brothers drives the rickshaw while the other is an unorganized labor. They are unable to keep a track of what is happening around the world, and in the same way, no one really cares much about them either. They live in an island that is much more secluded than Marichjhapi. This is their last resort, their ‘Pother Shesh’. Ananda Sarkar, the refugee leader of Marichjhapi, told me about another refugee leader of Marichjhapi, the Secretary of ‘Shara Bharat Unnayanshil Samiti’, Raiharan Barei. He was supposedly engaged in the fish business at some fish market in Hoogly. But we were unable to find any trace of Raiharanbabu in Uttarpara, Konnagar, Srirampur, Tarakeshwar, Chanditala, Jirat, Balagarh, Jairambati and Hoogly.

Situations were the same for three consecutive months. One day I asked the fish seller, Anil, whom I was familiar with, whether he knew anyone by the name of Raiharan in the fish market. Anil said, “There was a Raibabu once, but he has passed away. However, I know of another old man in the fish market, he might be able to tell you something regarding this.” The next day I boarded the fishermen’s truck to Patipukur, to the main fish market. When Anil introduced me to the old Raibabu, I realized that he was Raiharan. His two sons look after the fish market. His sons arrived after a while and I told them my purpose for the visit. I gave them my phone number and address. After a few days I arrived at their home in Dumdum. I got a load of factual data on Marichjhapi from Parulbala Barei, Raiharan Barei’s wife. I got to know of the whereabouts of youth leader Pabitra Biswas and Pabitra Biswas – the leader of the refugees at Mana camp in Chattisgarh, Raipur.

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

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

Ashok Gupta, a social worker, worked really hard, while he was staying at Marichjhapi, in order to devise various means through which the women residing there could be empowered and made self-dependent. We discussed a lot of things

together, but I could not persuade him to come in front of the camera. He kept on denying until he could not turn down my repeated requests. I have presented whatever he has consented to speak on screen. When our meeting was approaching its end, he presented me with a few invaluable books that belonged to his mother. There was also a book written in English–Bengali by Saibal Gupta among the rest of the books. I have only one major regret in our relationship. I had promised that I would gift him a copy of the documentary as soon as it was completed. The documentary on Marichjhapi was first aired on television in 24th July 2008; he passed away on 8th July 2008.

I had no idea that Upendranath Biswas, better known as Upen Biswas, thought so much about the oppressed classes. It was revealed to me while I was interviewing him. He was the first person to state that until the year 2000, there was no such place as ‘Marichjhapi Sangrakkhita Bonanchol’ designated by the government. No such record existed with the government until that year. Strangely, the court ruled against the refugees at Marichjhapi only because the government had been able to furnish documents that belied this fact. Upen da has declared in his interview that these refugees are the sons of Marichjhapi. He keeps working tirelessly for the uneducated and oppressed masses. He has also crafted a website for Marichjhapi. I will forever remember the immense excitement and eagerness he had shown for my work. Moreover, he did not stop at that; he was present with me in many of the interviews that I conducted with others and always enriched me with priceless advice.

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

Soumen Guha had to bump into obstacles repeatedly in the case related to Archana Guha that dragged for 20 long years. In the end, he donned the suit of a lawyer himself and won the case. I had handed over all the documents dealing with the

Marichjhapi incident to Soumen Guha. He has analyzed all of it in the writing 'Itihaase Marichjhapi Mamla'.

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

Satish Mondal, the president of the 'Shara Bharat Udbastu Unnayanshil Samiti', lives in Chattisgarh, Raipur, at Mana. Raiharan's wife and sons provided me with the contact number to reach Mana. They also told me that I could live there. I contacted the phone number they gave me. I got hold of the phone number of Swapan Mondal, the son of Satish Mondal. Satish babu had two more sons – Tapan and Tapas. He informed me that his father was unwell and had been admitted to a hospital. I called them every day during that time. He came back home after 10 days, and we left for Mana. I had Arun Sen, the founding member of 'Sundarban Sramajibi Hospital', as my companion. We reached Howrah–Raipur. Then we boarded an auto rickshaw all the way to the famous Mana transit camp. I still remember the date; it was the 27th of May, 2006. We hired a rickshaw at Mana to take us to our destination. The house we were living in was situated just beside that of Satish Mondal. It was a two-storied house; one would be easily able to infer that he was living in favorable conditions. We rested for a while and when we were back for our work, we learnt that the two houses had severed all connections between themselves. Of course, the reason was entirely personal. I also came to know that Satish babu was in the habit of sitting in the courtyard during the evenings. I saw that as an opportunity. It was summer and the heat was simply oppressive. As soon as the afternoon faded away into the evening, we arrived ready in front of Satish babu's doorstep. His eldest son made it clear that he would not let us speak to his father regarding Marichjhapi or any other matter. He turned a deaf ear to all of our appeals and requests. Moreover, he also expressed his disapproval when we asked to click a picture of the man. I informed the entire incident to Raiharan babu's in-laws. They came up with a possible solution. Robin Chakrabarty was the co-president of the 'Udbastu Sangathan'. He lived a few

kilometers away. He was in the habit of paying an occasional visit to Satish babu's place. I had two days in my hand, after which I would be off to Indore. I took their bike and arrived at Robin babu's place in the evening. He had a temple dedicated to the goddess Kali at his home. I realized that he was spending his days in worship. His wife offered me some prasada while he stood listening to whatever I had to say. After I finished, he assured me that he would come over next morning at 9.

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

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

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

Manmath Biswas came from Raipur on 28 May, 2006 at 7 in the morning. He is the president of 'Chhattisgarh Namashudra Kalyan Samiti' and also a bank employee. Binod Majumdar had also come over; his countenance bore the impression of a workingman. I have included their interviews in the documentary. The very next day I had train to Indore from Bilaspur at 9:15 am. From Indore I had to go to Dhar district, which was about 3 hours by bus. The state of Gujarat expands right from where Dhar ends. Sameer Samaddar, a doctor at Marichjhapi Hospital, lived there in utmost secrecy. I got hold of his telephone number and rang him up. He repeatedly requested me not to tell anyone about his whereabouts. Afterwards he resettled elsewhere.

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

If you want to reach Marichjhapi then you have to go through Kumirmari island. It was in Kumirmari that the refugees first came to from Dandakaranya. They foraged for food and drinking water on this island. RSP exercised their influence in this region. The refugees have repeatedly spoken of the contributions of Kumirmari

panchayat chief Prafulla Mandal and Zila Parishad member Pradeep Biswas. Although Pradeep Biswas later joined the CPM camp from RSP. Despite trying my best, I could not find the contact for Kumirmari. Arun Sen ran a labor hospital and an agricultural circle in Sarberia. People from different parts of the Sunderbans went there to avail of the services. I set off for Kumirmari on the basis of such an unknown contact. It is a three to four hours' journey on a bhutbhuti from Dhamakhali. It was 11th February 2006. We got down at Chhoto Mollakhali went over to the house of our acquaintance. After finishing my meal there, I went over to Kumirmari right next to the forest department office. I met Dinabandhu Mandal and Bhabasindhu Mandal. Both of them had been hired by the police during the Marichjhapi refugee crisis to look after certain chores.

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

Prafulla Mondal had brought along two more persons at the RSP party office in Gosaba. One of them was Nitai Munda; the brother of Meni Munda, the woman who was shot dead by the police on 31st January 1979. The other one was Rabi Mondal whose courtyard was filled with 40 dead bodies. They had been murdered by the police and gathered at one place so they could conveniently transport the

corpses later. We took interviews of all the three persons present. I had a talk with Prafulla Mondal regarding going over to Kumirmari.

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

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

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

Even the Bengali chauvinist leader Ram Chatterjee was put to use. Many may think that Ram Chatterjee, being a Bengali refugee sympathizer, did all the work by himself. Ram Chatterjee had informed Sukhranjan Sengupta, a journalist, that he does not do anything without the permission or approval of Jyoti Basu. The refugees had great love and admiration for Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose – the great Nationalist leader. They had even named Marichjhapi as ‘Netajinagar’. Ashok Ghosh of Forward Bloc was aware of this; he eventually started sympathizing with the refugees. The refugees of Marichjhapi were erstwhile denizens of Jessore and Khulna. The people living in Kumirmari were also predominantly inhabitants of Khulna. They belonged to the class of Namashudras. Moreover, the entire island along with Kumirmari was greatly influenced by the RSP. The refugees did not become members of any political party. Amalendu Bhattacharya, the Secretary of ‘Amra Bangali’, was in regular touch with the refugees. On the other hand, Nikhilbanga Nagarik Samiti was primarily concerned with thinking of various ways through which they could assist the residents of Marichjhapi. On 13th April 1979, Nikhilbanga Nagarik Samiti organized a mass meeting at Sraddhananda Park

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

Jyoti Basu realized that he was not in an advantageous position when it became clear to him that the refugees would never become a part of his political party; moreover, he was upset with the fact that the leadership of the refugees might probably be taken up by another organization. Meanwhile, the Muslim legislators within the Left Front had already started to oppose any plans of refugee rehabilitation with the statement that Namashudras were “illiterate” and “fierce haters of Muslims”. Jyoti Basu did not subscribe to Saibal Gupta’s denunciation: “Why are they coming here?” Instead of associating himself with such controversies, Jyoti Basu cleverly tried to find ways to oppose the influx of refugees. He turned a blind eye to all considerations of humanity and human rights and embarked on a mission to alienate the refugees from their brothers in Bengal. In order to achieve the desired effect, he did not shrink away from falsifying facts and using them through hateful propagandas. He used so many ploys to garner people’s support for his decision that it is impossible to count them all! ‘They are getting financial help from other countries, Marichjhapi has been transformed into an ammunition factory, the established rules and regulations governing forests are being broken every day, it is a ploy to alienate India, they are running a parallel government.’ Jyoti Basu had pursued his higher studies in England and he implemented the doctrine of ‘divide and rule’ that had been introduced to our nation by the Britishers. He prepared for a multipronged attack by engaging the police to commit as many atrocious acts as they could on the refugees. He sent his ministers and secretary to the place. At the same time, he held various conventions at places such as Taki and Mollakhali and said, “If we let people settle at Marichjhapi then we will be endangering the very existence of other islands.” He

employed such subtleties and weaned off the support that people residing in other islands had for the refugees at Marichjhapi. On the other hand, Jyoti Basu berated Ram Chatterjee and he was so scared that he had no option other than degenerating into a mere political pimp. He secretly escorted Aurobindo Mistry – refugee leader – to Writer’s. Jyoti Basu’s strategies to make the refugee leadership implode through such tactics thus become clear. He had even tried to create major misunderstandings among Rangalal Goldar, Radhikaranjan Biswas, Debabrata Biswas, Raiharan Barei, Pabitra Biswas and Satish Mondal. Jyoti Basu had maligned Satish Mondal in the State Legislative Assembly (Vidhan Sabha) as well. Incarcerating the leader of the opposition Kashikanta Maitra, trying to create a sort of information black hole at Marichjhapi by refusing entry to journalists and later throttling the news media houses whenever they tried to publish authentic news on Marichjhapi or restricting entry to human rights activists were components of his well thought out plan of evicting the refugees. The president of ‘Citizens for Democracy’ was Jayprakash Narayan and the Secretary for the group was Justice V. M. Tarakunde. Niranjana Haldar, a journalist, requested Justice Tarakunde on behalf of Amnesty International to visit Marichjhapi. As soon as Jyoti Basu came to know of this he wrote him a letter saying that the refugees are breaking the law and destroying the forest. He did not stop at that. Jyoti Basu left the city and went over to Delhi to visit Justice Tarakunde at his place. Arun Shourie was then working for Indian Express. He never published any article on Marichjhapi in his newspaper. Arun Shourie took sides with Jyoti Basu and assisted him in trying to convince Justice Tarakunde. Inevitably, M V Tarakunde suspended his visit to Marichjhapi. He implemented his schemes with great cunning in order to throw the refugees out of the island once and for all. He laid siege to the residents of Marichjhapi with his police force and party cadres.

Santosh Sarkar suffered a bullet wound from the police on 31st January 1979; he subsequently lost one of his legs in the firing. I met him by chance. At that point of time ‘Jalangi Nadibhangan’ was being edited. The video had been edited by Juhurul Naskar, he was aware of the fact that people were still researching on every thing that had chanced at Marichjhapi. One day he told us that he knew of a man who had survived the police firing in Marichjhapi, he lives at Ghutiari Sharif. I was waiting for the man, after gathering the necessary information, at a station along with Juhurul. He arrived. Santosh Sarkar took us to the very last village of that

path. I had gone there before but never heard of this man back then. The Left Front government had imposed Section 144 on 24th January 1979. They tried to kill the refugees simply by keeping them hungry and cutting off all possible ways whereby they could gather something to eat. They had blocked all avenues that allowed food and fresh water to reach the refugees on the island. It should be mentioned that all edible resources were brought in from Kumirmari. 40 people were killed by the State on 31st January 1979 when they had traveled to Kumirmari Island in order to get hold of something to eat. Santosh was a part of that group of people who were killed mercilessly. The police shot him in the leg and he lost it forever. The law keepers did not stop at that; they locked him up in the prison. How could they let a criminal like Santosh go away so easily! Santosh Sarkar currently runs an NGO. It works to empower poor women and make them self-dependent.

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

A majority of the upper middle class from East Bengal migrated to India after the partition of India. Subsequently, people hailing from the business class joined them. There was a massive exodus of people from Khulna in 1949 and from Barishal and Dhaka 8th February 1950 right after communal riots tore through those cities. The total number of people might have numbered close to a hundred thousand. As a result, the Nehru–Liyakat agreement was signed on 8th April 1950. Right after the introduction of passport and visa services in 1952, two hundred thousand refugees arrived in India, shortly afterwards every month saw close to the arrival of ten thousand people in our country as refugees. At around the time of Bhasha Andolon (the day that later came to be known as International Mother Language Day) about thirty thousand refugees came from East Bengal and took shelter in our country every month. After 1956, a form of border crossing required a permit. On 26th December 1963, a massive riot broke out all over East Pakistan

around the theft of lose hair from Srinagar Hazratbal Masjid. A large number of Hindus, especially those belonging to the working class took shelter in India at that point of time. The issue attracted a lot of attention and the Home Minister of the central government, Gulzarilal Nanda, sat in a meeting with Finance Minister Krishnamachari, Rehabilitation Minister Mehr Chand Khanna and leaders of every political party in West Bengal. There were no rehabilitation camps for the refugees who came to West Bengal on 1964. They were given chits of paper from the receiving center and were hurled on to trains bound for Dandakaranya straight away. They were the ones who were identified as the excess burden for the government. Unfortunately, they were simply classified as burden or useless trouble; they were unable to ever achieve the status of human beings for the government. This was one of the primary reasons that contributed to the deplorable living conditions that they were subjected to in many of the camps. Some of them were worse off than criminals living in prisons! They were offered freedom from the horrendous camps after 8–10 years and then, almost immediately, thrown into Dandakaranya.

I have tried a lot, but I have been unable to get any leads based in Dandakaranya. Malkangiri in Odisha is one of the main spots in Dandakaranya from where countless refugees sought shelter at Marichjhapi. Try as I might, through all the leads that I have at my disposal, I am unable to establish any sort of contact with anyone from that place. Then one day, all of a sudden, I received a phone call from Jagadishchandra Mondal. Gobinda Haldar had read his book and sent him a letter along with his personal contact number. Gobinda Haldar was living in Malkangiri at Malkangiri MV 79 (village no. 79) back then. I still remember that it was 15th December 2006. I called up Gobinda Haldar without wasting any more time and told him about my intentions. He informed me that he would send me the names and contact numbers of the people who, he considered, would be able to help me with my work. On 24th December 2006 he sent me the names he had promised; there were five people mentioned in his list, and he had also sent me their phone numbers. One among them lived in West Bengal and frequently visited Dandakaranya. He looked after the printing of the books published from Malkangiri. His name was Parimal Baidya; I gave him a call. He came on the 25th of December 2006. I followed his advice and left for Malkangiri on Januray 2007. Meanwhile, I had also been able to establish contact over the telephone with the

four other people mentioned in the list. I did not have any problems after reaching Malkangiri. Early in the morning, the very next day after reaching Malkangiri, I went out to take a closer look at the villages. I was able to reach village number 82 on the first day. The total distance was a hundred kilometers. Sunil Biswas, Ashok Mali and a few other men were in the car with me. Sunilda was the man who took care of the essential. Sunil Biswas works at the labor office in the district of Malkangiri. He was striving to make Bengali, at least, an optional subject in the primary sections of the schools in Odisha. I noticed that none of the students in Malkangiri were able to read or write in Bengali. The medium of communication and learning was Odiya. Despite being Bengalis, they have to endorse Odiya as their mother tongue.

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was early in the morning and I was getting ready. All of a sudden, I noticed a bulletproof armored car belonging to the army on the road. I moved on with my plan of the day. While we were waiting with our luggage at the Poteru bus stand, I learnt that the Maoists had blown the armored vehicle to bits. It meant that there

would be no transport for the rest of the day. A very few buses plied on the road in that area. Their utmost limit was Japur. The road to Umarkot started from Japur. The Koraput headquarter was 30 kilometers away.

There was not much work throughout the whole day. It did not feel as if it was winter. We had to keep the fan switched on for as long as we were in the room. The only true touch of cold could be felt just a little bit deep into the night. One can see a large stretch of the Poteru river from the ashram. The road is also visible from the same place. There was a thin khaki clad policeman walking to and fro with a long stick in his hand. One of the locals told me that the man was the Officer in Charge of the police station. The evening still had a few hours left to roll into the night. I went up to him and introduced myself in an effort to learn more about the condition. I asked, "How can you roam around without any weapons even after such an explosion chanced a few meters from this place?" The OC replied, "I don't have a mother nor have I married. If I have to die, I will die... but I will wound my attackers as well." I got to know about many more incidents from the locals. They told me that the Maoists had burnt down the house of the local MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly). The house stands as a testimony to its own destruction at present. The MLA lives in the city at present.

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

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

There were many families who had traveled from Betul in Madhya Pradesh and Mana in Chattisgarh. If anyone wants to conduct a research on the missing persons then he/she can easily do the same. I would say that it is possible to find them out.

12% of the refugees did not return to Malkangiri. More than a hundred thousand refugees had set off for Marichjhapi. And even after 27 or 28 years, while most of them have been able to gain a semblance of self-dependence through the excruciating labor that they have to undertake daily, almost 30% of the people spend their days on a half-empty, if not an empty, stomach.

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

I have always come across the same explanation for the incidents that took place all those years back while interviewing the people who had visited Marichjhapi – a ruthless and coordinated attack by goons and the police. A selected few interviews have been proffered to the readers for their perusal.

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

And it is not just with the refugees at Marichjhapi; Siddhartha Shankar Ray had also guided Amiya Samanta when it came to combating the Naxalites in Birbhum –

in other words, the Congress leader had asked the police officer to slaughter the young men. As a result, a large section of the youth between the ages of 14 and 19 were murdered in cold blood within 20 days. It did not take long for the vice-chancellor in Shantiniketan to get whiff of what was about to happen. He had rushed to Indira Gandhi in an effort to put an end to the vile bloodshed even before it started. He was unable to do so.

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

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

"Did you know Ashok Senapati?"

"It's already evident from my letters that I knew him." I also knew that the police had murdered him on 22nd November 1971 near the Nikda dam in Laujor village of Rajnagar Police Station. Samanta was the Superintendent of Police at Birbhum back then. Raba Dutta Senapati's wife had been arrested from Parsiya village just half an hour earlier. He asked the second question before I could speak,

"Do you know where he is now?"

He answered the question before I could,

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

“Do you know Siddharta Mitra?”

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

“Do you know where he is now?”

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

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

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

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

The West Bengal Police had established a statue of Shahid Matangini Hazra right beside Tamluk Police Station. Sidhartha Shankar Ray had inaugurated the statue on 17th December 1975. The base of the statue was adorned with a shloka from the Bhagavad Gita: “Yatha Niyuktoishmi Tatha Karomi.” The name of Ranajit Gupta – a contemporary high-ranking police officer – has been etched just below these lines from Sanskrit. I received the news from Shukhranjan Sengupta, a journalist. Amiya Samanta could have simply blabbered those lines from the Gita and relieved himself from all the sins that he had committed. He did not do that. Amiya Samanta has, on the contrary, picked up the pen and weaved a humongous web of lies in the name of opposing the police torture perpetrated at Nandigram. He has even gone to the extent of taking up the mic and making demonstrations at public venues. He has become a great worshipper of humanity. Secretly, he tried to put forth the theory that Jyoti Basu’s police forces were progressive while Buddhadeb’s police forces are reactionary. Strangely, he has not spoken a single word about police officers such as CI Gangadhar Bhattacharya – Gangadhar was his subordinate during the Marichjhapi operation; in fact this policeman was the subordinate in all the genocides that had been perpetrated during the Jyoti Basu regime. During the massacre at Marichjhapi, he was responsible for capsizing the boats of the refugees and killing them by drowning. Subsequently, this notorious police officer was killed at Tiljala. Amiya Samanta has also refrained from writing or mentioning anything about the tortures meted out to the people during the Emergency – under the regime of Sidhartha Shankar Ray. Ray had been unable to reward him amply for his murderous services, however, he had awarded Amiya Samanta with a certificate. It was with the help of this certificate that Jyoti Basu recognized him and sent him to Marichjhapi to exterminate the refugees. Jyoti Basu also helped Amiya Samanta with his promotion. Perhaps, he was under the impression that he would be rewarded with much more for his services, but Buddhadeb Bhattacharya never let that happen. This is, probably, one of the primary reasons that explain his extreme anger for Buddhadeb’s police forces.

Through Amiya Samanta’s attacks on Ross Mallik’s research work, he has proved that the truth can only be known and spoken of through government documents and the speeches made by the administrators. He has not considered the words of the opposition worth listening to. Moreover, he has tried to trivialize the entire story of the violent attack on villagers. He has written, “It is true that the

administration had created some pressure on the refugees to leave, but they were never forced upon boats nor were they attacked with lathis and guns.”

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

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

It should be noted that Amiya Samanta has designated activities such as “fishing” and “working as a wage laborer in neighboring islands” illegal activities. He also said that the “volunteer teams” and “outsiders” attacked a police camp at Kumirmari, but why did he not say anything regarding what kind of weapons the refugees were using against the armed policemen? How did the two locals die when the police opened fire? Are we to presume that the locals were helping them in that case? The bullets were fired on the 31st of January 1979. All potential routes to transport food and drinking water from neighboring islands had been closed down with the help of Section 144 since 24 January 1979. Children and the aged living on Marichjhapi started dying owing to the crisis. Desperate to help the helpless, a handful of restless youngsters from Marichjhapi tried to make their way to Kumirmari in search of food. They were promptly shot dead. Meni Munda, an adivasi woman, was killed in the firing; her corpse was also piled up in the big boat along with the others. Since she was a local in the area, the police had been unable to get rid of her body. The people expressed their grave discontent against the police by means of a public demonstration. In an effort to hush up all kinds of protest and dissenting voices, a sum of Rupees five thousand was given to the Kumirmari panchayat via the Block Development Officer so that it could be handed over to the family of Meni Munda. The panchayat bought Meni Munda’s family piece of land with that money.

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

Amiya Samanta has gone on to write,

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

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

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

Amiya babu writes,

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

The interview was taken on 27 December 2006. The entire length of the interview was 42 minutes and 2 seconds. 88 people had been interviewed in all and the total video recording span out to 40 hours. The documentary was one hour long. Going by normal human logic, no one watches documentaries that are 40 hours in length, nor do the people associated with creating documentaries make them so long. Quite naturally, only selected portions were shown in the documentary. Does Amiya babu mean to say that his selected portions were not important? He had accepted the fact that food was prevented from being transported to the island. What was his humanitarian excuse for killing people by preventing them from eating when they were hungry? Even criminals behind bars are entitled to food by law.

He has written,

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

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

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

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

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

Why did Jyoti Basu have to hurry to Justice V. Tarakunde’s place to stop his organization ‘Citizens for Democracy’ from investigating into the happening at

Marichjhapi? Why did the police waste so much time of the investigating team appointed by the parliament by barring their passage on the riverways?

In an effort to save Jyoti Basu and the Left Front, Amiya Samanta has ended up entangled in the web of his own lies. He had said that the refugees smuggled rice out of the country into Bangladesh. He wrote, "Tobacco and biris were procured from Bangladesh. Biri from Khulna and Jessore are famous." Unfortunately for him, Amiya babu has confused all the facts while composing his great fiction. It is a fact that one cannot find biris made of leaves in Bangladesh. Biris are rolled in paper in our neighboring country. Bangladesh has a high demand of biris made in West Bengal. This can be regarded as one of the main reasons that prompt biri smugglers to gather in Murshidabad.

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

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

Both ICS Saibal Gupta and IPS Amiyakumar Samanta were administrators. Saibal Gupta had always sided with humanity. He never lost his power of judgment when it came to ascertaining what was right and what was wrong. In fact, he never compromised with injustice. His prompt resignation from the Unnayan Parshad (Development Board) of Dandakaranya within ten months proved that he had not been transformed into a highly paid slave of the State. He had not forgiven the State's atrocities on the innocents of Marichjhapi. Amiya Samanta had even gone to the despicable extent of attacking Ross Mallick's works on the basis of his

paternal lineage. On the other hand, he exercised complete silence in the case of Saibal Gupta's writings on the same issue. Saibal Gupta's compositions are very famous. Besides being published in national dailies, it had also been published by Anandabazar. It is true that Saibal Gupta's descriptions are theoretical in nature, but it should be kept in mind that he was an adept administrator as well. Amiya babu was clever enough to restrain himself from commenting anything on Mr. Gupta's works; he knew that it would compound matters for him further if he tried to lock horns with him.

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

The oppressors always find it easy to oppress and exploit the masses as long as they linger in the darkness of illiteracy and lack of education. Governments all over the globe perpetrate the crime of trying to distance its masses from the kind of education that helps them have a practical outlook as much as possible. It is understandable that the governments do not want their people to be able to explain the basic facts by themselves. There was a time when the term "janagan" (masses) was used to refer to the people who supported holistic development of a nation. The political parties could have gone to any length to please this "janagan". However, at present, the term "janagan" has become obsolete. The political parties have started using the term "manush" (human/individual). It should be noted that Tata, Birla, Jindal, Salem and Ambani are also "manush". On the other hand, farmers, workers and laborers can also be categorized as "manush". If they are placed in the same category, there can be no distinction when it comes to the factor of development. Recently, I have come across certain articles based on the tigers of Sunderbans; they seem to focus on facts that have been quoted as "lies" and "theories". One of the research papers has brought to light the fact that "the tigers have become more aggressive and have also started preying on humans after the Marichjhapi incident". The sole reason behind the attacks on these researches is to stop any effort at unraveling the incidents that took place at Marichjhapi.

Jim Corbett was a famous hunter and researcher. He has carried out his researches in countries that abound in tigers – Kenya, Nigeria and a host of other places. He

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

I had visited Nafargunj via Jharkhali in the Sunderbans during the 70s. The inhabitants of Nafargunj had been facing a lot of problems due to the tigers at that point of time. Three boatmen and seven other acquaintances accompanied me. We were on a simple wooden boat that required oars to move ahead. I was able to catch a glimpse of the “Bidhoba Palli” (Community of Widows) as soon as we entered Khari from the river Matla. However, there is no such place with the name “Bidhoba Palli”. The name Bidhoba Palli (Community of Widows) stuck as almost all of the male occupants of the village had succumbed to tiger attacks. I noticed that there were a lot of bamboo poles that stuck into the soil, but the houses behind them were empty. There was no trace of human life in most of them. It was 1984 when I came to know that tigers were frequently attacking Dayapur, Jamespur and Lahirpur. I went to one of those places along with Animesh Sinha. A man whose wife had died in a tiger attack just five days back hosted us. I noticed that there were three little girls in the house – ten years old, six years old and three years old. They had had their heads shaven clean (it is a prevalent custom in Hinduism to become bald whenever a close relative passes away); I understood that they had taken part in the rituals meant for bringing peace to the deceased. Those three little girls told their father, “Do not go to catch fish anymore.” We were sitting in front of them all the while. The man replied, “What are we going to eat if I don’t catch some fish?”

Hundreds of men, women and children plunge into the river to get hold of some carp. The tigers lie waiting in the dense bushes planted by the Forest Department as part of their project. And it was evening when the tiger pounced on the woman. His husband was right beside her. He quickly grabbed the fishnet and swung its barbs towards the animal. The tiger got hit and sprang away to safety. He boarded a

rickshaw and tried to hurry his wife to the nearest doctor. Unfortunately, he was unable to reach there on time. We discussed about these problems with the villagers and, finally, ended up with the following points:

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

Tigers try to get hold of humans only when they are left on an empty or partially empty stomach. It is a fact that almost all of us are taught from childhood that tigers are man-eaters – that they prey on human beings. We, inevitably, end up believing in all these stories. It is wrong! In fact, the sustained effort to hammer

such false notions into the human psyche is nothing short of a crime. This is similar to the wrong concepts that people harbor regarding snakes. It should be kept in mind that everything that has been taught so far through stories, folklores, ancient epics and sagas does not necessarily have to be true. Those age-old books were not true when they told us, “The Sun moves round the Earth.” The truth was, “The Earth moves round the Sun.” How much time did it take to establish this simple fact? Goebbels was not successful here as far as his theory is concerned.

Experience based reality is the factor that has helped establish the truth. When it comes to Marichjhapi, it must be said that the tigers dwelling in the forests therein has tasted too much human blood – something that was quite unfamiliar to them until a few years back. The animals had been hungry for a long time and the availability of humans made them hunt for the helpless food gatherers in the forest. Furthermore, this statement will corroborate the fact that tiger attacks on human habitations had increased post 1979. The commoners can easily understand these facts; there is no need to qualify these with complex theories and lies. The experiences of the survivors are enough to bring the world in front of the truth.

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

The Marichjhapi refugees who live in West Bengal have formed the ‘Marichjhapi Sangram Samiti’. They have declared 31st January as ‘Marichjhapi Diwas’ (Marichjhapi Day). They organized an event in Kolkata on that day in 2010. Their main objective was to bring every man, who had gone under hiding for fear of being intercepted by the Left Front police, on a platform so that they could meet each other and spend some time in remembrance of their fallen friend. They had not travelled all the way from Malkangiri in order to inaugurate a book at the Kolkata Book Fair. They were only concerned with telling the people of Kolkata

about the unthinkable tortures that they had had to endure in the past. There were many who had promised to provide the organizers with all kinds of possible help for the event. However, there were a few who refrained from extending their helping hands in the end; they did not even turn up for the program. They managed to come up with certain technical excuses. There are still some people who realize that all official processes, laws and regulations exist only for the benefit of mankind and not the other way round. These people came forward during such crisis and it was for them that friends and companions of the massacre were able to meet each other after 30 long years. A meeting that left almost all of them teary eyed, they had said.

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

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

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

Subhashchandra Tarafdar

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There were only two seasons that wreaked havoc in the midst of this desert – summer and monsoons. Vultures circled the skies; there was no sign of any other bird. The underground water table could only be reached after digging four or five hundred feet into the soil for long hours with heavy machines. Even then the tube wells would require at least four or five strong and hefty men to pump out just three or four buckets of water. There were always about a hundred people waiting in queue at these tube wells throughout the entire day; and the queues had to be safeguarded at all times to prevent people from breaking it. Food was rationed and every adult was registered to receive 500 grams of boulder rice while the children were given 250 grams everyday. 57 paisa was charged for every kilogram of rice. Every person was given Rs. 10 to buy rice and all other essentials. However, caution was taken by the authorities to ensure that no family got more than Rs. 78 no matter how big the family was. The city of Raipur had ample resources in its markets, but the refugees did not have the means to buy the food they needed to survive. As a result, they had to sustain themselves with stems of cauliflower, wild yam, and different plants that grew in the wilderness. The government did not provide us with fuel. There were a few businessmen who sold coal but it was way

beyond our means. Most of us could not afford to buy from them. Such situations compelled each family to send out its members in search for dried wood or other fuels at the break of dawn with the bare minimum stuffed in their bellies. It was an excruciating task. The person had to walk for ten or fifteen kilometers before coming across an abandoned cluster of vegetation in the midst of the desert. He or she then had to tie all the dried twigs and sticks together into a heavy load and carry it all the way back to the camp. It is impossible to articulate the horrors of such a life. The glaring sun turned the sand beneath our feet to molten ore while the horizon seemed as if it were the bed of a blacksmith's smelting pot. The refugees did not have shoes; many among them walked barefoot while others tried to cut out a crude slipper from rejected tyres. All of them grew big, painful blisters on their feet. Water was scarce and the unthinkable heat made the forager thirsty. That was not all, the desert played vile and vicious games with their minds as well. Many of them would often see a mirage in the middle of the desert and be lured by it. The searing pain of thirst within them would entice them to keep moving ahead, in the direction of the illusion. They would often keep telling themselves, "Is that not an unending source of crystal clear and cool water! I need to hold on to my senses for a few more minutes, just a few more minutes and this insurmountable thirst would be quenched within an instant."

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

One day, in the afternoon, the screams of a young girl rent the air at the Baroda camp. The people of the camp rushed in terror to see what had happened. They saw a woman, holding the girl by the hand, giving her a sound thrashing. She kept

repeating the same words, “Will you ever dare to steal again? Tell me! Why did you not steal away my soul you little thief!”

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

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

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

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

As per government grants, people were provided with different cloths, such as, dhoti and kurta (Panjabi) for men; saree, petticoat and blouse for women; pant, shirt and frock for the adolescents. The quality of the clothes was so cheap that a man wearing those kurtas would look like a scarecrow from afar. It seemed as if a shirt had been kept over a bamboo stick to shoo away pest birds from farmland. The length of a dhoti was equal to 6 hands and a saree was 8 hands long. When washed in water, one could realize the actual quality of these clothes. They were mostly produced from mosquito nets after hiding the big gaps by starching. From the nature of these clothes given to the refugees for covering their bodies, one can understand the quality of the machines and the tailors that were instrumental in making them. For example, the fitting of the blouses was so pathetic that even after

slipping one's arm into a sleeve, there would remain ample space for more arms to be slipped into. And the other sleeve was so narrow that it was impossible to let one's arms enter. A sensitive and mystic refugee poet gave an account of their struggle regarding food and clothing and voiced his protest in the following song,

I went to the Control, there was not an iota of space for standing,

I left my son back at home, he was dying of hunger.

They are giving us salt, salt grains are as thick as coal,

You need to smash the salt grains in husking pedals to make them better.

The cloths are pathetic, not worthy of putting on,

They look like sacks of onion,

These buggers have made the arrangements, don't they have their own dear ones?

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

Although there was a government hospital for the treatment of the refugees, the health workers neglected their duties immensely. All through the day, hundreds of patients used to stand lined up in the scorching sun in front of the doctor's clinic. Unless a sensitive and experienced person, it is impossible to conjecture the horrific experience encountered by the patients suffering from excruciating pain. Irrespective of their gender and age, people had to stake their life and undergo an elongated ritual of waiting to visit a doctor. Let me inform you that, except for D. K. There was no other hospital in any of the camps in Mana that provided the patients with the facility of long-term treatment. Hence, all the patients fighting for their life were not fortunate enough to even reach the hospital timely. Most of them had to breathe their last in the ambulance or inside the huge basket on their way to the hospital.

In other camps, a round tent or a fence made of coarse mat was considered to be a hospital where the compounder used to produce a few barrels of red mixture as medicine for the patients. Whatever the disease might be, the patients used to line

up with vials to collect a file of that red mixture which they considered to be as infallible as Sanjeevani. If anyone violated this rule, there was no saving him from the furious admonishments of the compounder. Besides that, the doctors were coarsely abusive to those mothers, who, owing to shortage of food or malnutrition had given birth to a skinny or sick child. It's difficult to even describe their condition. In spite of all this, the imperilled and helpless mothers used to digest these abuses silently and prayed for their sons' wellbeing. They never, even by mistake, uttered a word of protest. They used to beg for their sons' life from the doctors only through their helpless cries.

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

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

That day, the dark clouds gradually engulfed the scorching sun of the bright blue sky. Lightning sparks accompanied by roaring thunder reigned all over the sky. In a while, the raindrops started rolling down from the sky in torrents. And for this

reason, the dead bodies in the morgue could not start their journey towards the crematorium.

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

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

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

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

Then there is monsoon. On the plain land, the tents were set up one after the other to construct a block. The front side of a tent was only 2-3 hands away from another one. Within this empty space, a bed was dug up to build a furnace for cooking. Inside the tent, there were arrangements for staying and keeping furniture. Under this circumstance, a torrential rain could upset the entire set up of their lives. Water would flow down from the tent-roof leaving the furnace and all the other stuff floating in the vast expanse of water. Hence, the starving people were compelled to stand in that waterlogged space holding their babies in tight embrace. The babies, driven by hunger, gradually became unconscious and fell asleep in their parents' lap. The helpless mother would try her best to feed her family with at least a handful of rice. She would vainly attempt to remove water from the water-filled furnace and to light a fire on that soaked wood. Being unsuccessful, she would cry her heart out in sheer anguish and helplessness. Should this silent weeping of a mother always remain a secret? Will this enormous suffering never find its place in the deepest core of a sensitive heart?

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

To keep the fire burning at this never-ending ceremony of funerals, a huge crematorium was constructed in a large area of seven acres adjacent to Mana aerodrome. Piling up one corpse on the other, a sky-high funeral pyre was formed. The fire kept burning all day and night in that crematorium. There was no

opportunity to pay proper homage to the deceased. Even dead bodies of the children were not spared from being thrown disdainfully into that ever-burning pyre.

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

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

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

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

You can think whatever you feel like, but am I left with any other option other than conveying these accounts to God with deep sorrow? I leave the matter to the readers who are educated, intellectuals and thinkers to consider as to what extent the promises made by the freedom fighters and the politicians during the time of partition have been effectively fulfilled afterwards. For your information, I hereby highlight some of the promises made by the distinguished political leaders and

other representatives who advocated in favour of the partition. Headline – ‘The promises made by the Indian leaders addressing the minority, stuck in East Pakistan as an aftermath of partition.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dr. Rajendra Prasad promised:

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

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

Sardar Patel promised:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘To the chief secretaries and the administration of all the states and union territories’

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

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

Sign: S. L. Ghoshal.

Under Secretary, Government of India.

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

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

From 1974 onwards, the government started to send people, erstwhile living in different camps, to the rehabilitation centres. Denying the instructions, people started launching fierce protests in those camps. It was mainly because of the fact that the government decided to rehabilitate people in the most underdeveloped and horrible places of India taking them away from the fertile lands of the golden Bengal. This was very similar to the experiences of the freedom fighters who were sent in exile by the Britishers to the places like – The Cellular Jail (Kala Pani) of

Andaman, grey desert islands of Rajasthan, barren lands of Madhya Pradesh, dense forests of Dandakaranya and other snow-capped mountainous provinces. The destiny of the refugees coming from East Bengal was determined in a similar fashion by the architects of their fate. As a result, massive protests broke out in the refugee camps where all the people pronounced in unison, “We are the sons of mother Bengal. We should be given rehabilitation in the land of Bengal, which is our mother’s lap.”

Their demands culminated into forming an organisation of refugees called, ‘Udbastu Unnoyon Samiti’ under the leadership of Sri Satish Mondal, Sri Rangalal Goldar, Sri Raiharan Barei, Sri Arabinda Mistry and the likes. At that time, absolute control of the camps lay in the hands of Colonel Nandi. On behalf of the committee, an application for rehabilitation in Bengal was submitted to Nandi. It was the beginning of huge protest rallies, hunger strikes and other indefinite strikes that were soon to follow.

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

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

take the refugees to the rehabilitation centre, the cars would stand in front of the camps. Accompanying them were the CRPF army with 303 rifles.

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

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

The references of epic battles in the Ramayana or the Mahabharata make us flinch even in our imagination. But the people who have actually experienced this devastating battle in the camps of Vata and Kumud are still alive. Countless people are still wandering with the scars caused by firearms in the battlefield.

Even today, a rush of memories concerning the dreadful and tarrying day of September 1974, flash in their mindscape. The day transformed Mana Vata into Shahid Vata.

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

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

But Brigadier Das was merciless in his approach of completing the task. At first, he unsparingly lathi-charged and afterwards used tear gas against the demonstrators. The poisonous gas infected everyone from new-born babies to elderly people and made their lives miserable. Mr. Das was still not satisfied. To quench his thirst for

destruction, he ordered- Fire! No sooner had they received the order, than the CRPF jawans started firing their 303 rifles.

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

Although this bloodbath caused innumerable deaths, the government reports claimed that only three people were killed and twelve injured. A report published by the magazine 'Path Sanket' stated, during the time span of 1964 to 1975, no proper arrangements were made for rehabilitation of the refugees living in different camps of Mana. Some organisations, namely, Udbastu Unnoyonshil Samiti, U.C.R.C, C.P.I.(M) and Leftist Forward Block had been in constant touch with the refugees all this while. On 8th September, 1974, three people were shot dead by C.R.P in the camp of Mana's Shahid Bhata. 12 people were injured. U.C.R.C. General secretary Samar Mukherjee (MP), Pran Krishna Chakraborty and Suhrid Mallick visited Mana Camp for inspection on 6th and 7th November. Samar Mukherjee and his companions visited two more camps and conducted several meetings with the refugees. A central mass meeting was also held in the presence of twenty thousand people. Pran Krishna Chakraborty presided over the meeting. Besides, Suhrid Mallick Chaudhury, Udbastu Unnoyonshil Samiti's secretary Satish Mondal and Kalipada Basu delivered speeches. Samar Mukherjee was the main speaker who raised pertinent issues regarding the crises of the refugees. He wrote a letter to the central rehabilitation minister, Khadilkar, narrating the experiences of the U.C.R.C. leaders during their visit to Mana camp. In the letter Samar writes that they had a discussion on the subject of rehabilitation with the Samiti leaders. They are ready to be rehabilitated. But they were doubtful about certain issues like, quality of the lands, irrigation facilities and weather. Their past

experience had not been good in these regards. Consequently, even after rehabilitation, the refugees came back in large numbers. They did not want the same thing to happen again. They had an earnest longing to be rehabilitated in the Sundarbans. (Path Sanket, February 1975, P- 73).

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

On 25th January, 1975, Jyoti Basu went to Villai to conduct a meeting. He summoned the refugee leaders, Satish Mondal, Rangalal Goldar, Raiharan Barei and Kali Basu to Villai and promised, “If C.P.I.(M) comes to power, we will take all of you to Bengal. The claim of the refugees to be rehabilitated in the Sundarbans will be fulfilled.” In June 1975, bullets were fired at the camps of Kurud. One night, C.R.P.F. abducted a young girl from the camp. She was raped by multiple men and was returned to the camp in the morning. Afterwards, the refugees set off en masse towards Kolkata, West Bengal. On 26th June, Anandabazar Patrika published their slogan on the first page, “Let’s go to Kolkata, let’s go to the Sundarbans.” In a handbill found in Raipur it was written that, in the month of May, a contingent of Udbastu Unnoyonshil Samiti went from Hansnabad to Marichjhapi, situated in Goshaba police station area. There is an old village on the opposite side of 125 kilometres of outstretched sand bed. They were informed by the local people that in that place the high tides didn’t rise above 5 feet. The locals added, if we can build an embankment of 5 feet length and continue farming for a hundred years, why won’t you? There you have a scope of fishing as well. Hence, the population of sixteen thousand families living in Mana camp can be easily rehabilitated here. In Sundarban’s Dutta Pashur, 30000 more refugees can be rehabilitated. (Anandabazar Patrika, 23rd June, 1975)

From Kolkata it was reported that, the opposition leaders of the state along with the MPs of different other states were going on deputation to the President and the central minister Khadilkar towards the end of that month. The group of representatives consisted of leaders like Jyoti Basu, Tridib Chaudhury, Jyotirmoy Guha, Dr. Kanai Bhattacharyya, Jatin Chakraborty and the Forward Block MP of Maharashtra, Shri Dhoute. They demanded that more than 1.5 lakhs refugees

coming from Bangladesh were still not rehabilitated. The central and the state government should take every responsibility of their rehabilitation (Anandabazar Patrika, 22nd June, 1975).

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

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

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

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

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

A proverb says, “God save those who have no one.” Although you can refute such statements if you have the privilege of leading a luxurious urban life, it is not that easy for the abandoned refugees living in the perilous landscape amidst the

mountains. Having no one by their side, they could only turn to the almighty to save them from this enormous suffering.

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

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

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

But this was soon to stop. Now it's time to launch an attack on those feeble tents with their violent paws. The bears could easily destroy the tents as they tore them apart with their teeth and nails. At this point, the refugees began to scream helplessly, “Save us! Help!” They made an attempt to fight back with whatever they could manage. With scythes, shovels, spades, sticks, they tried to battle out

those deadly savages. Although the clamorous sound of their cries was able to drive away the wild animals for that day, the danger was not over at all. Later on, the animals never missed an opportunity to devour their prey.

In this essay, I have given a brief description of their journey from Mana transit camps to the rehabilitation centres of Dandakaranya. Before going further, I must provide a detailed account of the formation of the rehabilitation centre in Dandakaranya.

Although partition happened on 15th August, 1947, there was an unhindered influx of people between East Pakistan and West Bengal until 14th August, 1952. Until then, people were not awakened to the fact that, “This country is not mine, my friend. This country is not mine.” On 15th August 1952, both the countries’ government announced the enforcement of the passport system. Under this circumstance, the Hindus living in East Pakistan became utterly helpless as they were constantly tormented by the oppression of the Muslim League. The place was uninhabitable for them because of the factors like, religious persecution, socio-economic oppression, sexual assault on women and zero security. Consequently, an enormous crowd of people began to move towards West Bengal in waves. Until 1954, there was an opportunity to shift to India by procuring a migration certificate. As per government records, over 50 lakh people came to India during that time leaving behind all their belongings. To shelter them, Indian government set up some make-shift camps in different districts of West Bengal, mainly in the places like, 24 parganas, Bardwan, Ghosuri, Sonarpur, Hoogly, Sealdah, Hawrah, Birbhum, Murshidabad, Madhabpur, Bagjola, Medinipur etc. Almost 3 lakh people were accommodated in these camps. The rest managed to find their shelters by themselves.

Despite giving assurance of proper rehabilitation, the government made no arrangement of that sort until 1959. Consequently, a few refugee organisations were established, namely, Sara Bangla Bastuhara Samsad, United People’s Organisation, U.C.R.C. etc. Their agendas were to communicate with the government officials and to address the issues of the refugees’ crisis and safety. These organisations started to negotiate with the government regarding certain matters.

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

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

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

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

- 1) To conduct a nationwide signature campaign in demands of rehabilitation of the refugees in West Bengal with the help of the allotted money as well as proper development of the state by engaging the refugees into the process.
- 2) To strike a unity among different refugee organisations and to bring together all the democratic refugee multitudes.

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

According to 'Lok Sevak' magazine's report, "A gathering and a procession of over 10 thousand people rising in protest today, on 22nd December, bears the testimony of their enormous suffering caused by the Union Minister for Rehabilitation Sri Meher Chand Khanna's incompetence, worthlessness and anti-refugee policies. Sara Bangla Bastuhara Sammelon and Purba Bharat Bastuhara Sangsad jointly organised a huge rally today at 3 pm. At the end of the rally a long procession marched up to the house of the Minister to burn his effigy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Now, different refugee organisations started a non-violent hunger strike in protest against the government. Thousands of refugees were captured and put in jails. Many refugees lost their lives. Union Minister for Rehabilitation Sri Meher Chand Khanna assured the members of Parliament in Rajya Sabha that he will start the rehabilitation process only after ensuring that the place is fit for living. “Today, Union Minister for Rehabilitation Sri Meher Chand Khanna has promised the members of Parliament in Rajya Sabha that the refugees of West Bengal will not be sent to Dandakaranya until he himself is satisfied with the process of rehabilitation (Lok Sevak’s report: New Delhi, 14th March).”

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

In subsequent times, the protest movements in demand of rehabilitation within Bengal started getting more and more intense. Three thousand non-violent protesters were arrested. Police started to inflict ruthless torture on them. In this context, I would like to quote from Jagadishchanda Mondal’s book, Mahapran Jogendranath (6th Volume), “17th March, 1958: “A non-violent mass movement started today at the call of Sara Bangla Udbastu Shommelon. They demanded for rehabilitation in West Bengal. The Socialist Party leaders of West Bengal State Legislative Assembly Dr. Suresh Chandra Bandyopadhyay and Sri Haridas Mitra (MLA) led a nonviolent protest rally consisting of 3000 refugees towards Writers’ Building. The protesters were arrested for breaking section 144.

“At 2 pm in the noon, the refugees gathered at Subodh Mullick Square. Many speakers gave their speech in that meeting. Afterwards, at 4 pm, when the mob came out of Subodh Mullick Square and moved towards Rajbhaban via Dharmatala Street, police stopped them. Then they held a procession where speakers like Sri Jyoti Basu, Hemanta Basu, Jogendranath Mondal, Sunil Das, Debesh Sen, Dr. Pabitra Ray gave speeches. Afterwards, in Dr. Banerjee’s leadership, Haridas Mitra and other protesters broke section 144.”

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

Dandakaranya Development Authority was established on 12th September, 1958, with 25000 square miles of neglected forestland from Orissa's Koraput district to Madhya Pradesh's (Now, Chattisgarh) Bastar district. In 1958, for the first time, the refugees were taken from West Bengal to the lands of Bastar's Pharasgaon. 105 families were provided with agricultural lands and 45 families were engaged in small industries. Second rehabilitation process was done in the Umarkote region of Orissa's Koraput district. In 14 villages 1240 families were given shelter. Nearby in Raipur region, 1545 families were resettled in 24 villages. In the third phase, 2239 families were rehabilitated in 45 villages at Pakhanjor and 1027 families in 5 villages at Kondagaon. At last, at Malkangiri, 1023 families were resettled in 23 villages. This zone was an unplanned territory where there was no proper transportation. Under Malkangiri administration, there were many AEO centres. In 1975-76, people living in the camps of Mana since 1964 were rehabilitated in the workers' camps of Malkangiri. The camps were situated in the villages which were 10-15 kilometres away from the AEO centres. People had to cross such a long distance through an intensely dense forest path to meet the officials of Dandakaranya Project Authority. At that time, the numbers of villages in different places were: MV – 134, RV – 64, PV – 133, Kondagaon – 15.

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

When I came to know about the village, I felt a deep urge to reach out to them. I really wanted to know what were these people doing in this impenetrable mountain range after being deprived of the fertile lands of golden Bengal. I along with my 8-10 friends went to survey the village at noon. What we saw there filled our minds with utter despair. Each and every villager appeared gaunt being clad in tattered clothes. In each house, there was a room made of corrugated tin sheets. The unclean floors were made of clay. Some houses had verandas which were used for

cooking, others didn't even have one. Every piece of furniture in the rooms reeked of extreme poverty.

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

From their reply, we came to know that they were rehabilitated in 1964. The government had given them 6 acres of land. The crops they grow in that stretch of land help them to sustain for 3 months. After that, they start to starve. To feed their stomach, they go deep into the forest in search of food. They have to boil and eat the seeds of arum, potato and other vegetables to survive. It is not easy to gather vegetables from the forest as they have to crawl on high mountains averting the gaze of wild animals. The whole process involves a high amount of risk. If fortune betrays, the consequence might be as fatal as death.

I asked them, "What kinds of crops do you grow in your land?" Someone replied, "paddy, rosella, legume, sesame, lentils." I asked further, "None of these crops have good production?" The reply was, "In this hilly uneven land water doesn't stand. Since these lands are dependent on rainwater, if it rains at least once or twice after sowing the seeds, only then a proper harvesting can be possible. But that doesn't happen here. If it starts raining, it goes on until the crops are completely

damaged. And, if the rain stops, there will be no rain until the crops are dried out. The only hardy crop we harvest is rosella which grows a length of 2-3 hands on the watery land within 3 months of sowing. Then these plants are reaped and decomposed to extract jute. After drying up the extracted jute, it is carried 25 kilometres from here in bullock carts or loaded on our heads to sell in the market. With that profit money, we have to repay the loans. After that, we are simply left with nothing to feed our stomach or to buy clothes. Other crops that we harvest help us to sustain for 3 more months. A young man named Kalidas said in a cheerful voice, "Haven't you listened to that song by Gaur Sarkar?" Then he started singing that sad mournful song,

Who the hell wants to live in this country?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kalidas had a graceful voice and he was a talented singer as well. And this mystic poet Gaurapada Sarkar was rehabilitated in MV 35. His horrific experiences expressed through the song made our eyes watered. In the meantime, Tushar served us tea. On a plate, he gave us something that looked like fried lentils. After soaking some tea, when we put the fries in our mouth, we understood that they were not lentils. The taste was not familiar, rather it was a bit acerbic. I asked, "What is this?" Tushar Babu felt embarrassed, "Please do not take it otherwise. I know this food is not something you welcome your guests with. Although for the

whole world, this food is inedible; for us, rosella seeds have become a staple food. Since you wanted to know what we eat, I just tried to show you the reality.” Back then, I didn’t recognise rosella properly, but later on I came to know that it is a kind of jute. I have seen two types of rosellas; one is red and the other one is green. Its whole body is full of small and sharp thorns. The fruits are as big as Indian gooseberries. On top of the fruits there are petals like flowers. Inside, the seeds looked like pulses. Although it was not tasteful at all, people used to eat rosella seeds out of scarcity and food crisis. This invention was named “Dandakaranya food” which helped them to survive.

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

Hearing the incident, our throats went dry in panic. Everyone was afraid considering what would happen if a bear actually comes on the way. Would it be at all possible to get back to our family members? Our faces were a clear reflection of

our anxious minds. On seeing that, Tushar da and other villagers made flambeaus for us with jute sticks. Some of them came with us towards the end of the village and said, "Light the flambeaus while walking through the deep forest. Don't panic. We are all surviving on our fortune. Take God's name and set off for the journey. You will surely reach your destination." We started the journey in anticipation of the worst. As soon as we left the village, darkness covered us from all sides. We lit our flambeaus. Shiver ran down our spines. None had the courage to walk behind others. We walked together forming a group. Halfway through the path, we saw the light of our flambeaus glimmering on the body of a huge python. One of us lost his grip on the flambeau. We have never seen such a slow-moving humongous python before. The intensity of the shock made us completely unnerved. Someone took the courage to move forward. Following him, with our half-closed eyes we tried to walk together keeping a safe distance from the tail of the snake and eventually managed to reach our camp.

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

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

Near our camps there were some old residential villages. MV 83, MV 84, MV 101-102. In MV 102, we dug a huge pond for jute decomposition. The economic condition of these villages was similar to other villages. They belonged to the same level of poverty and impassivity. When we reached there, they came to see us. There was an old woman who previously lived in Faridpur district of East Bengal.

She looked outside from her door and said, “Let me see, let me see. So, these are the new sinners who have been exiled in this land of nightmares. We are already suffering the worst consequences of coming here. Didn’t you have any other option? You could have given your life to the waters of the Ganges. Why have you come here? To be eaten by tigers and bears?”

While articulating the feeling of extreme suffering that she had undergone, her eyes watered as she went on her way.

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

The natural surrounding of Dandakaranya was never in the favour of these uprooted people. The prime reason behind this was “failure”. For our weekly shopping, we had to go to Kuttipalli which was located in the Bastar district of Madhya Pradesh. The place was 25 kilometres afar from our camps. On the day of our weekly shopping, father told me, “You go and do your work. I will manage the shopping with other people.” I was doubtful if my father would be able to travel such a long distance. When I tried to resist my father from going to the market, he replied, “I don’t earn anything. You are the one who toil for money. If you do not earn your daily wage, what will we eat? All of us are dependent on you. Don’t worry about me, son. I won’t buy heavy things from the market. I’ve heard that good catfish is available in the market. If I find it, I will get some for us.” So, on hearing this, I set out with my fellow workers to be engaged in digging the pond. Father went to Kuttipalli market with his friends. He also bought a few big catfishes. In that intense heat, on their way home through the rocky path, my father

felt tremendous pain in his stomach. He lost his ability to move forward as he started writhing in pain lying on the side of the path. Being clueless, his companions gathered some bamboo leaves from the forest and made a cradle. They carried my father home in that cradle a little before the evening. All the camp dwellers gathered to see what happened. They tried to apply all forms of quack remedies, enchantments and mantras on my father to help him recover. But none of them worked. My father's naked body fainted as he was unable to bear the intensity of the pain. When I reached home tired from my work, I was shocked at this sight. Nobody was a doctor amongst us. So, I ran towards the old village. Even there, I couldn't find any doctor. Someone suggested, "You have to go to Malkangiri to find a doctor." Although Malkangiri had a hospital, it was 30 kilometres away from our camp and there was no proper road to travel. Only a narrow path through the jungle can take you there. But I was not familiar with that route. At 8-9 o'clock at night, someone said, "Don't even try to look for a doctor at this time of night. Go to Joga Pagol in 84. He will surely do something."

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

Matua guru Joga Pagol was also originally from Barisal, East Bengal. He was a man of small build, humble and generous. At Majhi's call, he immediately got up. He was lying in the dark. Getting up, he said, "Who has come here at this hour with his problem?" In the meantime, Majhi lit a kerosene lamp. I kept a 1 rupee coin in front of Joga and prayed for my father's recovery. Joga, in turn, started to pray to his lord Hari Guruchand in his mother tongue, "O Father Harichand! You have taken your children to this forestland. There is no doctor to treat them. Do you understand that? Now, if you don't ensure their wellbeing, where will they go?" Then he shifted from the veranda to the open space below, gathered some dust in his hand and said, "O Father, here I am giving him dust from your leg. Please take away his father's pain." Then he caused a handful of dust to touch his forehead and gave that to me saying, "You are feeling hot, aren't you? Take this.

Saying Guru's name, smear the dust on your father's stomach. Lord Harichand and Lord Guruchand are very generous. They will ensure your father's recovery. And, remember to take your father to me tomorrow. Now, go."

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

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

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

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

a half hours. Go and stand at the end of this line.” Without having any alternative, I kept my father seated in a shadowed place and stood at the end of a huge line of almost 150 people. It took two hours to get to see the doctor. The doctor looked at my father and asked in signs, “What happened?” When my father started to narrate the incident of his sudden stomach ache on his way to the market, the doctor stopped him saying, “Listen, we do not have time for so much talk. Tell me what’s your problem.” Being snubbed, my father only said, “Stomach ache.” That put an end to the enquiry. No more check-ups were required. The doctor quickly wrote a slip and gave it to my father. When my father got out, I gave the slip to the compounder. He passed on a 50 ml. file of Gelusel and said, “2 spoonfuls, thrice a day.”

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

In 1962, 47 villages were established in Malkangiri zone. Taking into account these 47 villages, at the advice of the officials of Dandakaranya, a zonal committee was formed in 1962. This committee used to operate from a temporary camp in MV 7. Its secretary was Annada Halder. Until 1965, the number of villages was 70. The committee was re-established during that time. Sri Haren Mazumder became its president and Sri Nikhil Biswas, its secretary. Most probably, Nikhil Biswas later became an MLA (independent) in 1985. Until 1975, the number of villages in Malkangiri, Umarkote, Parulkot and Kondgaon were 138, 64, 133 and 16 respectively. After 1964, 5 acres of land were given for the formation of new villages. From 1968-80, 4 acres of land were allocated for rehabilitation purposes. In 1975, an embankment was constructed in the river Potteru to start a big irrigation project. The villages formed under this project were named as ‘Malkangiri Potteru Village (MPV)’. People rehabilitated here were provided with 3 acres of land, among which 15 decimal was for residential purposes. In MPV, 83 villages were set up. The total number of villages in Malkangiri was 217, two of

which were allotted for small-scale industries. The village I was taken to for rehabilitation, was located in MPV 34. I had no other information except for this number. There was no trace of any village. It was a vast stretch of open land. The workers of previous camps might have cleaned the forest to turn it into a desolate landscape. The place was encamped with several tents where 65 families were rehabilitated. From each existing workers' camp, 9-10 families were taken to this new shelter. This process involved a shrewd strategy. If the authority had wished, people from each camp could have been given a separate village. But they did not do the same, because they well knew that these people had constantly been involved in mass movements for their demand of proper rehabilitation since 1968 up until 1975-6. The current situation is so intense that given a chance, these unified people might strike up another protest movement against this mismanagement. That's why all their requests were bluntly denied and they were scattered in different villages all over Malkangiri.

Immediately after being rehabilitated in those tents, we were put to work. We were provided with the equipment needed for deforestation. Allocation of land for our houses was still not determined. Under the commands of the contractors in charge of those forests, we had to toil ceaselessly from morning to night for one long year. For us, the forest was an unknown territory inhabited by deadly wild trees, at the touch of which the skin would burn and gradually decompose. There were plenty of poisonous insects whose bites would make our bodies swell up and we would squirm in pain. On top of that, venomous snakes of different species used to haunt those areas. Well camouflaged against the green leaves, a green snake could kill someone at one bite. Except for that, there were other wild animals like bears and foxes. Our lives were constantly at stake. All the refugees were promised that once the forest was cleared, their residential area would be determined. That's the reason why everyone set sail towards an unknown destination with a slight glimmer of hope in their hearts. Previously, while living in East Bengal, these people were associated with various professions, like, teachers, litterateurs, poets, businessmen, sculptors, musicians, fishermen, farmers and so on. They were not familiar with excessive physical labour. Now, they were keeping their life at stake for the dream of a better tomorrow. But, did everyone get what they desired? No. People would go out to work in the morning with equipment for deforestation, food plates and glasses. It was uncertain if they would return home safely in the evening.

Nirapada Halder was a sturdy young man of 25. Before shifting to the rehabilitation centre from Mana, he married Latika. His family consisted of 3 members which included his mother. Like everyday, he got out along with his group to clear the forest. He was carrying 7-8 roties tied to a plate, a pot of water, a spade, a shovel and a gad. Since afternoon, their family members used to wait for them to come back safely. Latika and her mother-in-law were doing the same on that day. One by one, all his group members came back, but Nirapada did not. As the evening approached, Nirapada's wife and his mother became extremely anxious. To get a glimpse of her son, Nirapada's mother started walking towards the forest. But there was no trace of him. So, she came back hurriedly and enquired Nirapada's companion about his whereabouts. But none of them had any definite news. Being utterly helpless, the mother pleaded with everyone to go in search of her only son. Her incessant screaming reminded everyone of their responsibility towards their missing companion. Keeping their tiredness aside, all the young men from the camps set out in search of their friend into the forest. They made flambeaus, took their shovels and spades and as they marched forward, their shout pierced through the silence of the deep dark forest.

They walked almost 2-3 kilometres through the heart of the dark impassable forest and continuously shouted Nirapada's name at the top of their voice. It seemed as if the dense forest was quaking severely in response to their desperate screaming. Nearby mountains echoed Nirapada's name repeatedly. The light of the flambeaus and the sound of their screams echoing through the hills made the wild animals get alarmed as they started to run away. The forest was so deep that there was always a possibility to lose one's way. That's why they were trying to mark their way by collecting dry leaves and setting them on fire in some places.

After walking for an hour in the light of the flambeaus, they reached the spot where the deforestation was taking place. But there was not the slightest trace of Nirapada. As soon as the boys shouted Nirapada's name, they could hear a horrific roar of a bear. As they looked in that direction, they saw a huge black bear running away trampling the weeds and the tree branches on its way. Everyone yelled at the top of their voice and started chasing away the bear. Having moved a little further, they saw Nirapada lying senseless in a pool of blood under a tendu tree. Without wasting a moment, they lifted Nirapada up. He was still alive. But his neck was

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

Having returned to the camp, they splashed water on Nirapada's eyes and face and applied other quack remedies to bring him back to senses. On the next day, Nirapada narrated the incident to us in detail. He said, "I was resting under the tendu tree after I finished eating the rotis. As a cool breeze touched my tired body, I fell asleep. The bear came from the other side and seized my neck with its paw. Initially I thought it was a man. But when the action was repeated, I looked back and saw a bear balancing on the tree with its hand and was attempting an attack on me. I stood up and got hold of its hands from the other side of the tree. I realised if I released its hands, I would be finished. So, resting my legs on the tree, I pulled his hand as tightly as possible while chanting God's name, "Save, father Harichand!" The bear was putting all its force to free its hands. I uttered, "As long as I am alive, I will never release your hands." Looking around I found that all of you had already left. I didn't know what to do. But I was determined, if I die, I won't spare the bear either. Afterwards, I heard your screaming and looked in that direction. At that point, the bear got an opportunity to free its hand. It pawed at my back violently and ran away. I have no idea what happened after that."

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

In July 1977, 16 decimal plots were measured and given to us for habitation. We built our houses in these lands with tree branches, leaves and woods from the forest. Each family was given a pair of bullocks for farming. Some families got bullocks with broken legs but they were promised to have a replacement later,

which obviously was never to happen. We were given ploughshares and were instructed to make ploughs from them. Afterwards, groups were formed and each group consisted of 5-7 families. Also, we were provided with paddy seeds, rosella seeds and legume seeds and were instructed to cultivate as much as we can.

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

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

Since the beginning of the Dandakaranya project until that time, there was no bonding between the newcomers and the natives. Because, the Adivasis used to

avoid the company of Bengali speaking people. Until 1965, they didn't know anything about clothing or cooking. They used to wander in the forest all day with a bow and arrow for hunting. When they would come across any people clad in clothes, they would hide themselves in the forest. There was no furniture in their rooms. They only used utensils made of clay. To drink water, they used the shell of a gourd as a container. Although they had plenty of cows, bullocks, goats, sheep and buffaloes, there was no shelter for these animals. They didn't even drink milk or extort milk from the cows. For farming, they were dependent on flat surfaces on the hillslopes or on the areas where the forest was not so deep. Having cleared the plants that would grow there, they somehow ploughed up those lands to sow seeds. Having sown paddy, corn, sorghum and other cereals during monsoon, they used to visit their fields again at time of reaping. They were satisfied with whatever was left behind amidst the weeds after the wild animals trampled the fields. They were even unaware of the usage of money or savings. They needed very little to sustain which was mostly managed from forest resources. Although salt was very precious to them, they didn't know how to produce it. In Bejengiwada, Sikhapali, local markets would be held where they would exchange daily necessary goods. Some unscrupulous traders used to arrive there with salt and dry fish. In exchange for one bucket of salt, these sellers used to take away one bucket of rice mahua and other such things. The refugees could not trade in those markets. If they gave money for buying anything, it was thrown away with disgust. To trade their necessary things, the refugees had to travel either 90 Kilometers from Malkangiri to Motu or 200 Kilometers from Motu to Jaipur. For transport, they only had bullock carts provided by the government. During 1969, Jaipur-Motu and Jaipur-Poria; only on these two routes the buses ran for once a day. Sometimes, it would even take 2-3 days to set the journey in motion if the cars broke down on their way.

Until 1976, they were gradually getting acquainted with the usage of clothes. The young girls used to split a lungi into two halves. While they wrapped one half of the lungi around their waist; with the other, they covered their breasts draping it over the throat. The male adults (who lived adjacent to the Bengali villages) would generally wear loincloths. There was no linguistic exchange among people. Both sides used to find the other's language incomprehensible. Although, the newer generation of the migrants who were rehabilitated here before 1964, had a certain command of the Adivasi language of that place. There was an Adivasi village

adjacent to ours, named Salemari Kunda. While coming here from Mana, I brought with me a radio and a cycle. When I drove the cycle through the village, people irrespective of their age, rushed to hide themselves out of fear. We had to go to the AEO centre through that village. While coming back, I saw a group of archers sitting behind the tree with their arrows fixed at the bow. If the strange looking machine, called cycle, caused any disruption to their security, they would throw arrows in my direction for self-defense. Considering the situation, I never took out my cycle again until our interactions were at ease.

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

we denied their orders, they whipped us ruthlessly. We would only get loafs for food. I was compelled to stay with them for 10 years. Then, one day, I capitalised on my opportunity to escape. The people there used to talk in English and Hindi. Perhaps, because of that, my Hindi is good, although I can't speak enough English.

I said, “After the partition, unfortunately, we left our homeland and sought refuge from the Indian government. According to their convenience, the Indian government had given us rehabilitation in your motherland. In future, both of our next generation will consider this country as their homeland. In terms of living and growth, we both need to extend our hands to each other. In this respect, the Bengalis and the Adivasis need to build up a steady relationship. But, can you tell me why do the Adivasis run away when they come across a Bengali? This won't definitely help us in the process of striking a good friendship.” Moka said in reply, “British has left this country, still there is a persistent notion in our mind that the people wearing clothes are not good human beings, rather they are ruthless and violent. Given a chance, they will take us away and won't free us ever again. Initially, we had a firm belief that these people had been brought here only to capture the Adivasis. Your attire is similar to that of the Englishmen. Your food habits and ways of living are much different from ours. And for that reason, we can never have a faithful and cordial relationship between us.”

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

“Just before the evening, the woman came back to the village with a group of Adivasis equipped with bows and arrows and started attacking the villagers. Under

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

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

“After being released, Nagen could not arrange for the money anyway. So, he had to sell the chickens at a very cheap price. Then he went to the police station with his wife. Nagen left his wife seated on the road and went to the officer by himself. Having received the money, the officer became very satisfied and said to Nagen, 'You are free to go now. But remember, never hold an Adivasi woman's hand.'

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

coming back. Nagen replied, ‘My wife wants to know where should I bring the thief from now on.’”

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

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

Not only in MPV 23, Ram Chatterjee conducted huge meetings in various other places like 110 Malkangiri Damsite, MV 79 and MPV 81. On several occasions, he

assured the crowd by saying, “We will provide rehabilitation to all the people living in different corners of the country at Marichjhapi in the Sundarbans.” I am a witness of Rambabu's excited speech myself. In the Dam-side meeting, he said, “We never forgot the promise we’d made. Currently, we are in power in West Bengal. The wheel of fortune has turned in our favour. The dark clouds in the sky of our fortune being wiped out, we have come here to arrange for the resettlement of all the Bengalis in Bengal. Five billion Bengalis are waiting to welcome you in Bengal with extended arms.”

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

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

Starting from Raipur railway station as far as the balcony of the rail-storeroom, there was not an iota of room left. On top of that, throughout the station premises, people waited in anticipation for their opportunity to board a train. They had to manage defecation and urination in unimaginably pathetic condition. In a deadly unhygienic atmosphere where the filthy drains were infested by mosquitoes and flies, amidst the helpless cries of the hunger-stricken children, some had to collect papers, some boiled a meagre amount of rice they could salvage or chewed a small piece of loaf or dry flattened rice, while the others spent days in starvation throughout their journey to reach Hasnabad railway station. Unless you are a

witness, it is impossible to even imagine the plights of these people fighting against such hardships. In general eyes, they did not have any respect or esteem. Common people covered their noses with handkerchiefs and looked at these people through side glances when they happened to cross them in the street. They were even deprived of the minimum dignity of a disgusting mongrel.

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

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

I was fuming with rage at their laughter. But considering my situation, I controlled myself and said, "You are also a woman. While it is such a disgrace for a helpless woman who is compelled to deliver her baby in front of thousands of men, is your conscience sleeping? Don't you feel a prick of your conscience? These avaricious

men, blinded by their lust, are competing with each other to witness the process of how they were born on this earth from the mother's womb. They are making fun of an agonised and helpless mother. And, you two, being police-women with big canes in your hand, are cackling so insensitively and enjoying this amusement? If you have minimum qualities of motherhood or womanhood left in you, use those canes properly. Make arrangements to send the imperilled woman to any restroom or to the railway hospital."

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

Though I was not a traveller without a ticket, being a refugee was my crime. Even if I bought tickets, millions of my refugee brothers could not afford it. Then I remembered the song written by a distinguished folk artist, "While protesting, you need to take the snake by its throat." But I did not have the courage or strength to even lay my hands on the throats of these black cobras. Being dispirited and dejected, with tears in my eyes, I took the blessing of mother Bengal and looked at the sky saying, "O mother Bengal! This is how your five billion sons with ten billion raised hands are welcoming the homeless proletariats! Keep yourself satisfied with your happy sons, I am heading for my exile in the forests!"

After being stopped at Kharagpur by the police forces of the Left-front government, the refugees could never move towards Marichjhapi again. Returning to the desolate villages, I saw their left-out cows and calves grazing in the vast stretches of forest. In the evening, they would come back to the desolate thatched houses. The villages looked like crematoriums blazing in the hot sun in dreary loneliness. At night, this deserted land seemed to turn into a haunted place. I, sitting there alone, left bereft of my near and dear ones, couldn't help but shedding tears at the memories of the bygone days. "Although the bonds of affection are lost, the memories are still inscribed. O dear, my heart aches, I cannot bear this loneliness." I have no direct experience of the episodes that followed regarding how the Left-front government, to fulfil their promise, lured the refugees to go to

Marichjhapi and welcomed them. I only possess some tearful and raw interviews of the victims and some tragic handwritten documents signed by the general secretary of the Marichjhapi Udbastu Unnoyonshil Committee. Those papers graphically depict the genocide perpetrated by the Left-front government during 1978-79. Other than that, I have no secret information about how this leader and his henchmen, the perpetrator of this genocide, conspired to affirm their control on the throne of Bengal.

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

Betrayal

Sunil Halder

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

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

At Mana, Durga Puja was usually organised by the Dandakaranya Project Authority that was run by the central government. For the first time, in 1970, the refugees took the initiative to organise Durga Puja without any help from the government. From 1970 onwards, the rift between the Board of directors of the government and the refugees was getting prominent. Captain Nandi had indiscriminately used tear gas and gunshots to throttle any demand of the refugees. The camp dwellers only demanded for their rehabilitation in Bengal. Samar Guha

first came to Mana in 1971. Having arrived here, Samar witnessed that the Bengalis were chased away from their own land and were living an infernal non-existent life as a burden of the free nation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The history that follows is marred with shame. We had no idea whatsoever that Jyoti Basu could be so inhumanly insensitive in dealing with the lives of so many proletariats like us. People like him were enjoying the benefits of freedom at the expense of so many refugees who were dependent on their leaders. He couldn't have conspired to fire at us or kill us starving like this if he had the slightest humanity left in him, let alone his communist identity. Such an act of betrayal was only possible for him because we belonged to the lower class, we were hard working farmers, fishermen, blacksmiths, potters and most of us were uneducated. We are even worse than the animals. And so, we are exposed to the whims of these people. Even after so many years, those horrific memories haunt us from time to time. We shudder at the memory of this betrayal even today. They claim themselves to be the friends of the poor! Will the history of our struggle and their betrayal ever be written? Will these human looking beasts ever be punished?

Interview: 10th June, 2010

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

How Many Times Will They Be Homeless?

Ashoka Gupta

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

Answer: Since the days are long gone, it is difficult to even recount them properly. In the year 1963/64, we were in Dandakaranya. We came to Marichjhapi later, at the time of the incident. But during our stay in Dandakaranya for 10 months, we visited each and every village there. We went to Amarkot, Parulkot, and then Malkangiri. Observing the course of things in those places we understood that the refugees were not happy with their condition. The main reason for this situation was mismanagement. Amidst all this, they tried to settle down wherever they'd gone. When I went there, I came across many people whom I met in Noakhali. It is interesting to note that, the people I'd met in Noakhali before, were there in Dandakaranya too and the familiar faces of Dandakaranya were seen in the camps of Kolkata as well. So, it seemed to me that these huge waves of people, uprooted from their own land, were just moving from one place to another helplessly. How to find a way to help them? And, why were they uprooted from their own land? With the assistance of the governmental or non-governmental organisations, these people could certainly have been rehabilitated. While roaming around different villages of Dandakaranya, I realised that they were trying really hard to earn their livelihood from agriculture. But, after cultivating for six months, they thought they

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

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

Answer: Tyranny of this sort should never happen.

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

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

cooking rice for lunch, police opened fire at them. The instance of inhuman torture we have recently experienced in Nandigram bears a resemblance with what happened in Marichjhapi back then.

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

Answer: Of course, it should have been. As a matter of fact, once a few members of an international organisation came and started staying at my house. Their agenda was to see how the refugees were persecuted and how they tried to earn their livelihood. But they neither managed to get any interviews, nor received any help from the government. In my opinion, that is the reason why these kinds of attempts remained unsuccessful. This is more or less my account of the Marichjhapi massacre. Bulletins have been published on why they came here, how they arrive and how they were displaced. Along with the Marichjhapi bulletin, there are 3 articles written by my husband which can be reprinted. Other than that, I have no information of the whereabouts of those people who came back from Marichjhapi. But at least, we know that the people living at Dandakaranya were facing the same mismanagement. I distinctly remember having written a full-length article on the refugees of the Mana Transit Camp. I stayed there for days and observed that the non-governmental workers were more sympathetic towards the needs of the refugees than the government employees. They were putting immense effort into making the habitation at Mana a better place for living. If a township had been built at Mana, it could have been transformed into a city like Faridabad. My husband made a plan but it was not effective. If you wish, you can go through the old papers and find out that there was a clear distinction between the approaches of the non-governmental and the governmental organisations. Whereas the government employees were inordinately complacent with their own efforts, the NGO workers tried to provide the refugees with all the favours and aids from the government. That's why the refugees received many things from them. If you read the article on Mana camp in the book of Dandakaranya, you will find the account of things they received. These things could have led them to build a proper city if they were not oppressed like that at the camp of Mana. Although they were tormented brutally at the camp of Mana, still there was an administration. In Marichjhapi, there was nothing of that sort. In my opinion, an incident similar to the massacre of Marichjhapi can never happen in a civilised society. I can't think of

anything else right now. The proper region of Dandakaranya is a beautiful place. So many people have migrated there and tried to settle in. Those who could get hold of the legal documents for their lands built their own houses there. Later on, they were even elected MPs and MLAs of those places. But those who couldn't manage to get legal documents or got delayed in returning to that place from Marichjhapi, were unable to claim their lands. Even their loans were not sanctioned. Another important thing is that, be it in Dandakaranya or in Marichjhapi, if they had no legal document, it was not possible to find any job due to the absence of official records. It was literally impossible to sustain without a job. But amidst all this, those who actually survived, had immense amounts of strength as they tried to live like human beings adjusting with this abnormal surrounding. And, I hope, people who are still writing about this episode would very well understand that those of us who had gone there after partition, tried our best to provide the refugees with a proper rehabilitation where they would live with the dignity of human beings. This is all I have to say.

Interview: 10th June, 2007

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

The People have awoken

Mahasweta Devi

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

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

M : Yes, Punjabis were sent to Punjab, and, because they were sent to many different places, some went to Andaman as well. All the places are marked with the history of displaced people. When they were sent to Andaman, it was sheer injustice against the people who had already been staying there for a long time. As both the groups were equally weak, wherever they had gone, they suffered injustice. So, it happened this way. But I came to know that, on the pretext of sending them to Marichjhapi, Jyoti Basu had promised, "If we come to power, you all will be rehabilitated in West Bengal." Other ministers also said the same. They are not alive now, at least Ram Chatterjee is certainly not. After migrating to Marichjhapi, the refugees were severely tortured and were compelled to go back to Malkangiri, where there was no water, no farmland, not even a paddy field and for these people who lived on agriculture, the place was simply uninhabitable. Today this tragedy has become all the more relevant because we can see the same incidents taking place in the fertile lands of Hooghly's Singur or in Nandigram of East Midnapur or even in Khejuri. Although in these places, the people actually belong to this state itself and not from East Bengal, still the state government is devising the same mechanism of violence on them. Now the people are having a prick of their conscience while considering the tragedy of those who left Marichjhapi owing to a similar predicament. This similarity is getting prominent with the unfolding of so many events. The Left front, since the early days of being in power, played the same role of an oppressor. Thousands of children died as they were forced to starve or drink poisonous water. In spite of having the High Court's dictate, "These people cannot be deprived of food and water," the government seized all the launches and starved them to death. Thousands died of diarrhoea as they tried to survive by eating grass. The torture went to this extent at that time.

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

So, we can clearly see that while the United Democratic Front (1967) was in power and not the 'left front', Jyoti Basu was the minister. These events took place during his regime. Adivasi women were shot to death in Naxalbari. Their manifestation of

undisputed power on people over the years has reached to such an extent that with every passing day, their real face is being exposed more and more. They are increasing their degree of torture every day. In my opinion, they don't even have the right to run the government under the banner of the 'Left front'. It is, indeed, a part of the larger scheme of globalisation happening all over the world.

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

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

M: It is all the more important because the same thing is not happening here. In Singur, Mamata did not carry forward the protest single-handedly. It was a spontaneous outburst of the common people of Singur in general, especially the women. In Nandigram, too, the common people have stepped forward. When they went to Haripur to build a nuclear power plant, the women were the first to alert the villagers by blowing conches. Then these undaunted women came and lied down on the ground. They even attacked the policemen. The police got so frightened that the state government could not enter Haripur even with the assistance of a few thousand personnel. Haripur too is situated in East Midnapore. No outsiders entered that place. I was the first to enter there. So, it is not justified to consider this protest movement as a product of any particular leadership or political party. The common people have stepped forward to announce loud and clear that they won't let these things happen. We should respect that. Back then, the

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

Interview: 8th February, 2007

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

Item Marichjhapi

Sailen Chakraborty

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

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

together in harmony with minimum comfort. Hence, we also grew up with that sense of satisfaction.

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

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

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

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

This is how a college student of 1980s Rarh Bengal perceives his contemporary time. Amazement and wonder! They see eye to eye with one another. The lords of this area used to rejoice at their triumph in Kolkata and say, “Absolute majority once again, sir. We have swept away the opposition.” There was no opposition left except in Bankura town. Those who lived in the town were not mere ‘people’, but proper ‘human beings’.

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

So, when did I become disillusioned?

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

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

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

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

In the interview board, donations were demanded directly, which means I could become a school teacher only by bribing them. In spite of having graduated from the college, most of the young men and women were yet not ready to protest. In

most cases, the educated youths from Bankura-Purulia-Medinipur were ‘party workers’. So, a letter of recommendation from the local committee did not ensure a job because everywhere there were multiple candidates from inside the party. That’s why, the custom of giving ‘donations’ had started. During that time span from late 80s to late 90s, no teacher was recruited without ‘bribery’, until the School Service Commission came into existence. All my acquaintances who are teaching in schools at present are the products of bribery.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Why did I use the pseudonym?

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

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

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

All the copies of *Pustak Mela* were ‘sealed’. Fortunately, I managed to secure 5 copies beforehand.

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

Inside, I knew I was extremely stupid.

I resigned from the guild.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There is a limit to this pretence.

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

The blows inflicted by the incidents of Singur-Nandigram-Lalgarh had already exposed the actual nature of the leftists in Bengal to a certain extent. Since history repeats itself, the winds of change in Bengal have brought back the memories of Marichjhapi. In Rarh Bengal, the scenario of the undisputed authority of the left

has certainly changed. Those teachers who were the products of ‘bribery’, are now thinking in retrospect having reached their middle age. Is money the only thing one can attain in life!

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

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

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

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

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

That will certainly happen someday.

How will we be able to connect?

I believe that connectivity is very advanced now.

[This article was first published in the mouthpiece of 'Publishers and Booksellers Guild', the organiser of Kolkata Book Fair. But the article was soon withdrawn and a book criticism had taken its place in the pages of the magazine. I still have two copies of that issue (Sixth year, first issue, Baishak-Ashar 1409) as historical proof.]

Atrocious History of Shame and Hatred

Jhinuk Chakraborty

“Unlike the non-Bengali migrants who come from different provinces to West Bengal and occupy the footpaths or rail stations, the refugees of East Bengal had proper plans of rehabilitation in Sunderbans’ Marichjhapi island. But they were stopped in Hasnabad, 6 were shot dead in Bardwan’s Kashipur and many of them were forcefully sent back to Dandakaranya. The Left Front leaders did not allow the institutions like Bharat Sebashram Sangha, Ramakrishna Mission, Mother Teresa, Lutheran Church to do their service. They didn’t even let them give milk to the infants and the old. Consequently, almost 1,500 of them died in Hasnabad without having any treatment.” - Shakti Sarkar (Former MP of Sunderban). Source: *Marichjhapi*, edited by Niranjan Halder (P 52-53).

“In many places of West Bengal, the refugees were brought to a halt. Most of them were successfully sent back. I saw one such group in Hasnabad Station, they voluntarily stood in a queue in front of government offices to book tickets for returning. They were starving for 3-4 days. The suffering of starvation diminished their resistance to a huge extent. While returning, they cursed the entire state of West Bengal for treating them in such a manner.” – Sunil Gangyopadhyay. Source: *Marichjhapi Somporke Joruri Kotha* – Anandabazar Patrika, 11.09.1978.

“Most of the families who were returning to Dandakaranya have lost their children or parents or both forever on their way back. Their grief or suffering seemed meaningless in the face of betrayal. The West Bengal government sent 2-3 officers to look after the refugees in those return trains. I heard from them that on their way, they threw away the corpses of the dead people from the train compartments. They just did not care to wait for the next station to arrive and to arrange for a proper funeral.” Pannalal Dasgupta. Source: *Yugantar*, July 25, 1978.

History always leaves its mark. One cannot erase those traces. Someday or the other they attract people's attention. It must be so. Despite being apparently hidden out of sight, time itself digs up the events from the past. Humans create history themselves, leave their mark. When the wound, buried under the surface for so long, comes up, we are shaken to the core. How was this even possible! We are not in a position to deny anything. Of course, it did happen.

People change their stance with time but history remains the same. People feel ashamed of themselves. Sometimes, we are damned by history. As I turned the pages of this chapter of history, I felt so humiliated and dejected that I couldn't keep my head straight. I never imagined that the progressive leftist regime had such darkness hidden behind its mask.

“In April 1978, overcoming all odds, almost 30 thousand people, including men, women, infants and old ones, reached the island of Marichjhapi. They could survive on their own ability and toil until May, 1979..... Just as the captives at German concentration camps were starved to death, the refugees also met with the same fate at Marichjhapi. Conspiracy of a genocide started brewing. On 6th, 7th and 8th September 1978, amidst the natural catastrophe caused by a severe storm and flood, Jyoti Basu's government drowned the boats of the refugees with the help of police launches. On 24th January 1979, by creating a blockade, the government stopped all the food and water supplies from the adjacent island. The first incident of gunfire was recorded on 31st January, 1979. If we could rule out these events recorded by the people of Marichjhapi in printed form and label them as 'made-up fake stories', we would not have suffered this guilt of conscience. But these records are history. It has immense potential and power since it is solely based on brutal truth. You can ignore them with every strength you have, but at the end of the day, you must succumb to the truth.

So, we were successful!

Millions of people who were deprived of their homelands where they had been brought up, where they had their own houses and courtyards, had to bear the brunt of the glorious Independence of India. Was it only their responsibility to face the consequences! Were they suffering the consequences of their previous sin, or was it just their ill-luck! Those of us, who were busking in the glory of independence and

felt secured in our couch, were suddenly shaken up at the sight of so many people turning into refugees overnight.

It is true that the riots or killings have taken place, but on the part of the government, they tried their best to provide the refugees with proper rehabilitation. People belonging to the land of rivers and greenery, the namassut farmers who were originally from the districts of Khulna, Jessore and Faridpur got their rehabilitation in Dandakaranya, an infertile land with hills and rocks all over the surface.

So, we should not say that the government did not do anything.

But the Bengali farmers considered their rehabilitation in Dandakaranya to be 'exile'. In 1961, when the central government stopped the supply of doles in order to send them to Dandakaranya, a massive protest broke out in the form of a hunger strike against this action of the government. These demonstrators demanded rehabilitation in West Bengal. On 13th July 1963, Jyoti Basu, in his letter to the then State Rehabilitation Minister Prafulla Chabndra Sen, expressed heart-felt sympathy for the condition of the refugees and urged him to stop sending these unwilling people to Dandakaranya: “.....*although it was stated by the Government that West Bengal has reached a saturation point. I feel, therefore, that the rest may be found rehabilitation here provided there is willingness on the part of the Govt.*”

The central government was also determined to abolish the refugee camps in West Bengal. In the year 1959, Pandit Jawharlal Nehru said at a press conference in Kolkata: “Even if everything goes haywire, riots start tormenting the streets of Kolkata, we will still be firm on our decision to abolish the refugee camps.”

(Source: *Anandabazar Patrika*, 22.10.1959)

To fight against this adamant stance of the central government, Jyoti Basu wanted to support the refugees. On 21st June 1975, in a meeting presided over by Jyoti Basu, all the left parties of West Bengal decided that: The central government and the government of West Bengal must take all the responsibilities concerning their (refugees’) rehabilitation. (Source: *Marichjhapi* – Niranjan Halder, P- 33)

Most probably this amount of sympathy and compassion (!) shown by Jyoti Basu was a prime motivator for all the refugees who set off for the Sundarbans driven by

the hope of a proper rehabilitation when the Left front came to power in West Bengal in the year 1978.

Hopes betrayed! As we all know, whoever goes to Lanka, becomes a Ravan. This is how democracy works!

On 18th April 1978, 10 thousand refugees crossed Sundarban's Kumirmari and took shelter in Marichjhapi. They did not ask for any help from the government for their rehabilitation. Their demand was, "Let us stay in Marichjhapi as Indian citizens." They were certain that in those areas the high tides do not jump beyond 5 feet. If people living in those adjacent villages can build a 5 feet embankment and survive for a hundred years on agriculture, why can't they do that? Apart from that, fishery was also a very feasible option to earn their livelihood in that area.

Alas! they were absolutely unaware of what decision the government of West Bengal was going to take.

At that point, the C.P.I.M state committee appealed to the state government, "The refugees, who had come to Bengal from Dandakaranya, must be evicted from West Bengal forcefully, if necessary. After a 3 day session of committee meeting, general secretary of the party Pramod Dasgupta said to the journalists, "A serious conspiracy is going on against the refugees." (Source: *Anandabazar Patrika*, 2.7.1998)

The conspiracy was soon to be actualised. On 19th August 1978, with the help of several policemen and 20 launches, the passage through the river was besieged in a military fashion. As the refugees were still not giving in, the launches were set to capsize 200 boats loaded with resources, fuels and other daily necessary objects of the refugees. (Source: *Marichjhapi ki Marichika?* Shoibal Gupta. *Marichjhapi* edited by Niranjana Halder, P- 26-27).

The graphic details of the brutal oppression is recorded in the newspapers of that time as well: "The number of the houses set up by the refugees was not less than a thousand. The rooms were 100-150 hands in length and 12-14 hands in width. The rooms were not only demolished, they were completely gutted as well. Continuous police torture, lathicharge, rape, arson and robbery went on for 10-15 days at

length, still they could not overthrow the refugees from that place. (*Yugantar*, Falgun 20, 1384)

“It seemed as if we were living in a battleground. Or, in the border of the enemy line. The fields were populated with police pickets. If they demanded, you had to raise your hands high. They would frisk you all over. They would detain you in the camps and interrogate you. The place was not at all a government undertaken forest. The name of this area was Kumirmari, a hugely populated island adjacent to Marichjhapi.” The description of this dreadful event we find in Dilip Charkaborty’s serial column *Char Bhatar Path: Nishiddho Dwip* and CPI’s mouthpiece *Yugantar* makes us shudder.

“People did not come to this side for 14 days. They did not have anything to eat or drink. Police force surrounded the entire island and kept things under their control. In the first couple of days, everything seemed silent. Usual sound of weeping was audible. At night, people used to cross the river populated with crocodiles and sharks in search of rice and water. Gradually, that too was stopped. They tried to survive by eating jalipata and some sort of spinach, many died. During that time, we could hear their cries every day.

From 24th January onwards, the government besieged the island. On 31st January, they started firing. On 7th February, according to the High Court’s injunction, prohibition on fetching food and water was withdrawn. But even after that, stringent control on the refugees did not lessen. On 16th February alone, Ananta Mondal, Arabinda Ray, Niranjana Barei, Kartik Sarkar, Ranajit Mondal and Krishnadulal Biswas were arrested while they were out collecting rice. After the besiegement of the island by the government on 14th January, almost 43 people succumbed to death in starvation. (Source: *Kalantar*, 25-26 February, 1979).

“Do you want to know what they used to eat during the blockade? They used to fill their stomach by eating boiled grass of a particular kind. I can’t remember the name of that grass – but that used to grow in abundance in their area. At that time, Kashikanta Moitra was the opposition leader in the legislative assembly. I was able to show him the grass. (Source: A letter written by Kamala Basu to the journalist Niranjana Halder).

On 24th January, 1979, 136 deaths were reported owing to starvation in Marichjhapi's Netaji Nagar. 239 people died without any treatment having consumed inedible food. The number of sexually assaulted women was 23 as per record. 128 people were enlisted to be missing. On 31st January, 1979, 52 people were arrested from Basirhat and Alipore and were kept in lock-ups. Afterwards, 130 more were detained in jails. On 24th January 1979, police arrested 30 people who went out to fetch water. From 24th January to 11th February (1979), the number of boats snatched by policemen reached as high as 163. – There is countless evidence of these events.

When I turn these pages with shame and choked tears, I feel someone should come and yell out – These are all lies, lies, lies.

Genocide is constructed by people's barbaric instincts. That history, hitherto remained in dark, comes to light one day. After 26 long years, the truth of what happened in Marichjhapi came out with all the proper evidence.

Where will I hide this shame! I feel dejected! I am an Indian, and most importantly, I am a part of Bengal. And, Marichjhapi too, in the same Bengal. In this land of progressive people, shouldn't we rise up to speak against the injustice happening in Marichjhapi!

False accusation, Marichjhapi is their land

Dr. Upendranath Biswas

The map we can see here is a map of South 24 Parganas. The map was curated by NATMO, a map-making organisation functioning under the Government of India. They made this map depending on the data collected by an organisation of Survey of India. If we look at the Sundarbans as the forest area of 24 Parganas, we have to consider how and from where they have pointed this area in the map. There is a small insert map at the left-hand side. This particular map was inserted by our forest department. What is said there? The zone having human inhabitation is

marked as yellow, the town area is marked as pink, the sanctuary is marked with net signs, the primitive zone is marked with dots which is a core area, the buffer area is marked as green. This area is located on this side as well as on the eastern side of the map. Zooming in on the map, we need to focus on this area. Here, have a look at Kumirmari, where the refugees stayed for 15-20 days before shifting to Marichjhapi. Kumirmari is a small island having Jhilla reserve forest, Jhilla and Tuka river and crossing both the rivers there is Bangladesh. This area does not belong to any tiger reserve, it is not a core area either. Kumirmari is neither located in the primitive zone, nor it is a part of any sanctuary. So, it is absolutely false to accuse them of intruding on the conserved forest region or a tiger project. No, we need not write a novel to prove this fact. It can be clearly seen in the map curated by the government in 2000 that Marichjhapi island was not included in the tiger project, it was not a conserved forest region. It neither belonged to the core area, nor it was located in the primitive region covered by dense or mixed forests.

Now, geographically, the Sundarbans lies in the border of the south, south-east and south-west part of the Gangetic delta. The Sundarbans area has been shaped over many years. The area known as Gangetic delta has the river Bhagirati in the west, Brahmaputra in the east and the Ganges in the north. The Sundarbans is located near the sea at the southern and western-southern region of the Gangetic delta. Since earlier times, this forest has been a wasteland with no trace of any lake or island. Now the question is, who brought this land into shape? In the year 1948, Geographer Late S.P.Chatterjee, created the precious 'Bengali Maps'. In 2003, NATMO scanned the map and republished it without doing any composition. Chatterjee, in his map, focused on this particular region and explained that the people who settled here belong to the Namasudra or Namassut community. 99 people of this community has been converted into Islam and the rest are known as Namassut. They are the autochthonous people of this Gangetic delta living here through generations. Until 1948, the marshes and the forests of the Sundarbans had been reclaimed as an inhabitable place solely at the expense of these autochthons. So, today, when they are trying to settle in Marichjhapi and set up their own habitation, none has the right to prevent them from doing so. Their claim is legally, historically and geographically justified. We have collected all the facts about this community for the last 100 years since Beverly up until 1972. They are undoubtedly the autochthons of the Gangetic delta. Most importantly, these people

were evicted and brutally murdered when they tried to claim their own land for rehabilitation. This instance of absolute violation of human rights is unparalleled in the pages of human history.

One of the major accusations against these people willing to settle in was that there were some foreign informers in the group who were fomenting them. The question was raised in the parliament by Jyotirmoy Basu, the C.P.I(M) leader.

He made an accusation, “foreign agents have entered that place.” In response to this, the then Home Minister of India Mr. Patel said that the Centre had enquired about foreign agents operating in the Sundarbans and added, ‘We have no information that there are foreign agents.’” So, it was absolutely a false accusation and if you see the record of the parliament dated 23rd January, 1979, you might find the answer.

Interview: May 11, 2007

[Debabrata Biswas a young leader of the refugees. On several occasions, he secretly took the intellectuals, politicians and journalists of Kolkata to Marichjhapi. He also filed a case against the Leftist government in the Calcutta High Court for hindering food supply in Marichjhapi. Currently, Debabrata travels to Orissa, Kolkata and Madhya Pradesh to work as a temporary mason.]

Why This Dispossession?

Debabrata Biswas

Having migrated in 1970, we first went to Hansnabad. We became refugees, stood in a queue at Mana camp and afterwards we were provided rehabilitation in Betul district of Madhya Pradesh. They gave us farmlands, ploughs and other things necessary for cultivation, but the lands we got were mostly infertile, rugged and uneven. One or two inches beneath the surface, the lands were full of stones and hence they were unfit for farming.

Q: For coming to Marichjhapi you had to form a movement, how did you organise that?

Debabrata: When 'Udbastu Unnoyonshil Committee' was established in Mana camp, I went to different rehabilitation centres. I constantly kept contact with Satish Babu and that's how we got very familiar. During that time, Satishbabu was the secretary of the committee. We thought that having a centre at Mana would help people from different camps to contact Satish Babu, if necessary. Satish himself was available to receive the messages sent to him by people in crisis. Under these circumstances, Rangalal Goldar and Rabin Chakraborty went to Betul for organisational work in 1978. Bengali police officers arrested them from there and put them in lock-ups. At that time, Janta Party's Morarji Desai was the Prime Minister. This was Betul district. Around 10 o'clock at night, when we got the news that Rabin Babu and Goldar Babu were arrested, I was determined to get them released, But, I never wanted to bow down in front of the policemen. The following morning, we spread the news of their arrest in 27 villages. We told the villagers that our leaders Rabin Chakraborty and Rangalal Goldar had been arrested. I do not remember the exact date, but it was around 15/16th or 20th February, 1978. In the morning, I saw the Bengali officer Mr. Sinha, who arrested our leaders, was going through the bazaar on a bicycle. I stopped him and said, "You are under arrest." He asked, "Why?" In reply I said, "You have arrested our leaders. In return, we are arresting you." I had 400-500 people with me at that time which gave me immense strength. We got Mr. Sinha out of his bicycle and asked him to sit on the ground. Then we demanded, "As long as Rangalal and Rabin are not getting their parole, we cannot release you. Speak to the DRO and send news to the minister that you are here with the mass." The message reached the police station. Having received the message, the deputy Police Commissioner, Mr. Tewari came by. He had a cordial relationship with me, almost like father and son. He said, "Debabrata, if you release Mr. Sinha, we will also do the same with your leaders." I replied, "But sir, people will not believe this. They have taken charge of the matter. They are demanding that Rangalal and Rabin should be handed over to us. Once you get them here, we will send them wherever they are supposed to go." At this, the commissioner replied, "The case is already in the court. It will take some time." It was already 5 pm in the afternoon. The public was getting uncontrollable after having waited for so long since dawn. He told me, "Debabrata, I have given you everything you demanded for a proper rehabilitation in the villages – roads, water, ration system and other important things. I never left your demand unattended and tried to address all of them." Please have faith in me" I

said in reply, "I have immense faith in you. You have fulfilled all my demands. But at this moment, I am not able to control the mass. What should I do?" Then he said, "Okay, do one thing. You go and sit over there. Let me take charge of this matter." Then he called the policemen and ordered them to lathicharge. The public ran away. I was taken to the police car. When he took me inside the car, a group of young enthusiasts said, "Sir, we won't leave Debu da alone. We will also go with him." And then, these 8-10 young men got into the car. When we reached the police station, it was almost 11 o'clock at night. The officer handed over to me by saying, "Debabrata, I don't want to send them back to the village at this hour of the night, instead let me send them to the place they want to go." They replied, "we will go to Bhopal." He helped them cross Betul district at night. When they went away, I discovered that there was a police case filed against me at the charge of gheraoing Mr. Sinha for 24 hours without giving him even water to drink. I could not even contact the collector or the deputy collector at that time because I was very young. When the police called me, I would give them a visit. I didn't have much experience of politics back then. I told the police, "Sir, call my father. I don't want to stay here anymore." To the villagers I said, "I won't stay here, I will return to Bengal." I didn't even know where in Bengal I was supposed to come. My wife then said to me, "I will also accompany you." Both of us set off for Bengal. When we reached Hasnabad we met with 11 other families who were already prepared for their journey to Marichjhapi. Me and my wife became a part of the group which made the number of families 12 in total.

5-7 families from Bastar district whom I did not know at all, even I couldn't recognise them from their face, were there. 3-4 days after that, my friend Nirmal Dey, from the same Betul district, came by. Satish Babu had not come to Bengal yet, I met him in a village adjacent to Hingalganj near Hasnabad. He came to a village named Sholmari. Having gone there we saw that Goldar Babu was yet to arrive. He came with his family after 5 days, but Raiharan Babu and Arabinda Mistry were still not there. When I, along with Nirmal dey and some other boys went to meet Satish Babu, he said, "It's good that you all have come." Then, we all set off towards Marichjhapi together. This was the beginning. At that time, the members of 'Nikhilbanga Nagarik Sangha', Biren Babu, Subrate Babu, Kalidas Baidya, all of them were still alive. When we came across the poster, "We will never go back to Dandakaranya" at 136, Jodhpur Park, we saw that Subrata Da was

saying this on our behalf. Thus, we got acquainted with him. He told us, “We want to set up a tube well for you guys on behalf of the ‘Nikhilbanga Nagarik Sangha’ . We said in reply, “We don’t need a tube well at this moment.” Satish Babu said, “Subrata Babu, you go and tell Dhiren Babu that Kalidas Babu and the people here do not need a tube well at this moment. They will ask for it whenever they need it.” I was worried about the fact that we were to cross the Ichamati river and start our journey towards Marichjhapi. At that moment, there was high tide in the river, the government had enforced section 144, and boat service was completely halted. Raiharan Babu came by at night. We were all worrying a lot. Satish Babu was also there. What arrangement can be made for transportation by boat? We said that we would break section 144 and capture the boats that have capacity of carrying 200-250 mon weight of rice. We won’t care if they belong to the public or the government. We took hold of 7-8 boats from Hasnabad and planned to cross the river flowing along with its current. The river was fuming in high tide. What should we do? We planned to gather all the women who would blow conches and make ulu sounds which would help to generate strength in the minds of the young men. And that would make them jump into this journey. Having thought it out, we gathered all the women. Those who had conches were asked to bring them. When the group of young men heard the sound of ulu and conches, they realized that they had to take up the journey of crossing the river. This very sound of ulu and conches increased the mental strength of both the sides in the battle of Kurukshetra. In our case, the same thing happened. 10 young men along with others swam to cross the river Ichamati. One of them could not get to the shore, he floated away to the Bangladesh border. BSF rescued him. We seized 10-12 big boats and kept them under our control. With the help of those boats, we reached Marichjhapi. On our way, we halted at Kumirmari just the day before reaching Marichjhapi. The people in Kumirmari did not bother us at all. Pradip Biswas was the district president of RSP in Kumirmari at that time. I met his father. I enquired Pradip Biswas’ whereabouts, like, where was he from? Did he have his ancestral home in East Bengal? His father said that they have their ancestral home in Khulna district and their locality falls under the police station next to ours. When his father came to know about my lineage, a bond struck between us which was connected with our lineage. Then I told Pradipda, “Everyone who has come here is your own people,” He settled up here and was working as a school teacher. I told him, “You are a member of RSP Zilla Parishad, even if CPIM creates obstacles for us, you should

not do that. You are from RSP and we are desperately in need of your assistance.” He agreed to help us and said, “You all are my own people. How can I deprive you?” However, we finally reached Marichjhapi somehow, but there was no water available for us to drink. So, everyone sank into despair. I came to Kolkata and went to Subrata da following the address of ‘Nikhilbanga Nagarik Sangha’ I was given previously. I told him, “Subrata da, please do one thing. At least, you along with some others from Kolkata would visit Marichjhapi. People over there are mentally shattered and they cannot go on like this anymore.” At that time, we were leaders of the second category. Satish Goldar and Raiharan Barei were leading ahead of us. I, Sunil, and Pabitra were young back then and we were working together. I was especially attracted towards Goldar Babu because both of us were originally from Jalma Bhutiari area of Khulna district. So, people belonging to the same roots were somehow attracted towards each other. If Jagadish Da had his ancestral home in Barishal, I would definitely go to his place. Goldar Babu and I shared a similar relationship. When I asked Subrata Da to visit Marichjhapi once, he was quick to start his journey taking Biren Babu along with him. Having reached there we saw that there was no proper water supply, people had to collect water from Kumirmari. It was a terrible situation. People over there were completely devastated. Biren Da and Subrata Da assured everyone by saying, “Please do not be impatient. Do not lose your mental strength. The immense amount of mental strength that you all have put into coming here from Dandakaranya, keep that spirit alive within you.” The Left front government wanted to see how much strength is left in us. They thought, let them go to Marichjhapi, what would they do after that? Where would they get water from? Where would they collect food from? So, they would return automatically. But after having gone there, we did not give up so easily. When Biren Babu had gone there, we kept pursuing him for water supply. He gave a speech to reassure everyone and went back. Rangalal Babu and others collectively said, “Subrata Babu! None of them are going to give you tubewell. On behalf of ‘Nikhilbanga Nagarik Sangha’, he said that even though a tube well is needed, there is nothing in stock. I haven't told anything to Kali Da or Noren Babu, but if we wait for the tube well, people will not survive. Instead, I personally am giving you some money, go and see what you can do with that.” He gave us something around a thousand rupees. With that money I went to Hansnabad and arranged for the equipment, pipes and a mechanic. A tube well had also been bought. When I was walking with

a pipe worth 3 rupees per foot, people from DIB kept looking at me. Even the policemen noticed me, but they did not intercept. The CI was also aware of this. Having given the contract to the mechanics from Hasnabad, I set off towards Marichjhapi. We were able to reach the water level at 400 feet beneath the soil. The quality of the water was unparalleled in all of Bengal. It was so good that even the deep tube wells could not match its quality. Subrata Da might have thought that the money he had given was wasted, or this unknown person, Debabrata, had used up the money. I went to him within 4-5 days carrying the water in a bottle and said, "Dada, the money you had given or the help we received from 'Nikhilbanga' haven't gone to waste. This is the water from the first tube well we've managed to install." This tubewell was like discovering a source of water amidst a desert. People were immensely happy and so was Subrata da. He said, "The money I had given has been utilized properly." Then he showed this water to the journalists in a press conference. Everyone in the Press Club tasted the water and ascertained, "No problem at all. People can survive on this water." The water was so pure that after drinking it, many of them got rid of gastritis and stomach ache. At the assembly, Haripada Bharati and Kashikanta Maitra demanded, "Provide water to the people of Marichjhapi." Jyoti Basu said to them, "I have no right to install tube wells in Marichjhapi. That is a conserved area. I cannot enter into that zone with water pipes and rice sacks." However, they arranged tube wells for us. The CI of Hasnabad called us and said, "They have brought all the equipment, pipes and taps to Kumirmari. Tubewells and pipes have already arrived in Marichjhapi as well. We cannot install tubewells in Marichjhapi. What will you do now?" We said in reply, "Let us bring those things here." He said, "You have to arrange for everything by yourselves. I cannot do anything." We affirmed, "Alright. Let us take up this matter in our own hands." So, I along with Nirmal Halder, a boy called Barish and 5-6 other boys went to the CI and said, "Sir, we are taking away the water pipes and all the equipment and we are doing it forcefully." He remained silent. We also took the water pipes provided by the government. So, we had 3 pipes now. On top of that, RSS provided us with all the equipment required for 2 more tube wells from Hasnabad, Basirhat. All in all, we had installed 5-6 tube wells by now. Our water crisis was resolved. Now we had to look after our living conditions. Satish Babu said, "We need not worry too much about our sustenance. Once we have been able to arrange for water, we are out of danger. Now, you concentrate on finding the roots of the underground trees and sell them wherever

you like. Catch fish. There are plenty of fishes out here.” One day, Satish Babu and I were boating in the water during high tide. We noticed a flock of min fish coming towards our direction. It seemed as if a billow of clouds were floating in water. Looking at this, Satish Babu told Subrata Babu, “Just look at this infinite treasure you have under the water.” Looking at the abundance of various types of fish, Subrata Da said, “Satish Babu, people will not die here. They will definitely be able to survive.” After that, throughout the day, Satish Babu, Subrata Babu, I and most probably, Prabitra surveyed the entire passageway of the river upto the sea. We found our sustenance for one long year. We did not need any further help. Although, some aids used to come from ‘Nikhilbanga’. In 1978, there was a flood. At that time, Bangshilal was there in the RSS office. Subrata Da went there and asked Banshi to provide some food for the people in Marichjhapi. He gave us 5 sacks of atta. We took the sacks from Dhakuria station to Marichjhapi via Canning. We always kept contact with Ram Babu. Prafulla Sen went to Hasnabad. Ram Babu used to say to Goldar Babu, “I consider Debabrata as my younger brother, a brother from the same mother.” During the Emergency, Goldar Babu and I spent time at Ram Babu’s place. I had to hide in his place in a mason’s disguise as I could not stay in Betul. Police were after me and a circular had been issued against me stating that 25000 rupees would be awarded to the person who would be able to bring Debabrata Biswas to them. At Ram Babu’s house I used to do cleaning and other household work. Ram Da used to say, “There are police all around my house, there is CID as well. Be very careful. You are using my house as a hideout. If they somehow get hold of you, you will be in trouble and so will I.” During the time of Emergency, along with Ram Babu, Atal Behari Bajpeyee, Advani Ji, many others were arrested. Rangalal, Satish Babu, Arabinda Mistry were arrested as well. When the Left front came to power, our hopes rekindled. The people belonging to Khulna, Joshor, if not Faridpur, were mostly communist-minded. The southern part of Khulna was especially communist-minded. When the Left front came to power, our ancestors had a soft corner for Jyoti Babu in their minds for his communist identity. In Khulna, Bistu Chatterjee had a pivotal role to play in the communist movement. Afterwards, I got arrested in 1978. It was around 9 at night. I was at Ram Babu's place. He told me, “Debabrata Bandyopadhyay will enroll in RSP tomorrow. Prison minister. He should not be allowed to enter Marichjhapi.” That night, I got out of Ram Babu’s house. We went to Subrata Da's house in Jodhpur Park although he was not familiar with Ram Babu or anyone from the Left front.

Subrata Da asked, "Where will you all go now?" I replied, "We will go to Ram Babu's place in Chandannagar." When Ram Babu had asked the same, we said, "We are going to Subrata Da's house in Jodhpur." These interactions made us aware of the fact that none of them was going to harm us. When I was arrested, they arranged for my bail. Then, I went to the High Court along with Niharendu Dutta Mazumder, Amaresh Bhattacharya from 'Amra Bangali' and Subrata Da. They testified that food and water supply had come to a halt in Marichjhapi. If we need to restore food and water supply there, we would have to take legal measures. The supply had been completely stopped for 3 weeks. But, within a week or so, I escaped from Marichjhapi through the forest in the darkness of the night and arrived at Satjelia. From there, at dawn, I came to Jodhpur Park via Canning in a launch boat. But coming there, I learnt that Subrata Da had left for Uttar Pradesh to attend an All India Hindu Conference on the occasion of Makar Sankranti. As he was unavailable, I went to Haripada Roy who was a cheap doctor at the Calcutta Corporation. I also contacted Santosh Mullick from there. Everyone was anxiously waiting for Subrata Da to come. Dada came back after 2 days. I got my bail. The very next day, all of us sat for a discussion at Niharendu Dutta Mazumder's place. We talked about what was to be done to restore water supply in Marichjhapi which was stopped by Jyoti Basu's Left front government. Then, a petition was submitted at the High Court on behalf of Niharendu, Sakya Sen and all the refugees staying in Marichjhapi. We signed the petition as citizens of Marichjhapi. On the next day of submitting the petition, we received the order. Having received the copy of the order, I along with a journalist working in 'Jugantar' named Jyotirmoy Dutta and 2-3 boys from 'Amra Bangali' headed towards Marichjhapi without a delay. When we reached the forest office at Bagna, they did not allow Jyotirmoy to enter. Amiya Samanta was the SP of that place during that time. Amiya and the fellow policemen were running a microphone campaign saying, "Do not listen to what Debabrata Biswas is saying. The order of the High Court is a false one. All of you should come up." This was an utterly misleading campaign. With the order, I tried to manage a dinghy boat but none wanted to help me out of fear. I asked, "What is the price of that dinghy? 300 rupees? Keep the money and give me the boat. If the dinghy survives, you will get it back and then you will return my 300 rupees." So, I gave him the money and rowed that dinghy to reach Marichjhapi alone. It was a horrific situation in Marichjhapi. I last witnessed such a devastating condition of human existence during '71. 20-30 corpses of little babies were left piled up

without any funeral. I said, “What are you doing? Will these instances of child-death melt the heart of the Left front government?” Then I distributed 2 bottles of water, one sack of rice and 2 bottles of milk to them and directed, “Now go, cross the river. Bring water for yourselves, go to the market.” When they started journeying through the river, the police remained silent. Satish Babu, Goldar Babu, Raiharan were already there in Marichjhapi. I came to know that there was no food available for the last 8-10 days. A coconut tree had been planted previously but it was damaged because a bullet penetrated through its trunk. Although one type of spinach was available, it was absolutely inedible. Still, people boiled and ate it for survival. The suffering was inexplicable. I started to help the boys float in the river water. A number of women came forward crying, “Who will call us father and mother now?” It was a heart-wrenching cry. I bowed my head down and sat in the office. Satish Babu was sitting next to Raiharan Babu. Godlar Babu said, “Debabrata, you did a good job today.” When the night was over, Jyotirmoy came by. He was a journalist. During the day, he was not allowed to enter. He interviewed everyone. Then, everyone was called upon and was asked to leave in search of food as soon as the morning breaks in. For them, it was some sort of relief from the chaotic situation. Now, it was our time to build up more and more connections with people. So, we formed a working force which consisted of me, Sunil, Pabitra, Barish, Madhu, 15-20 other boys and started our campaign. To get rid of this condition in Marichjhapi, we decided to go to Kolkata and conduct a door to door campaign. Ram Chatterjee called me and said, “Since you guys are protesting and organising rallies, it would have been better if you had shifted the movement's direction towards Delhi.” We used to address him as uncle. I told him, “At this moment it is impossible to form such a movement, our hopes are totally shattered and we are very tired as well. We are too tired to even consider going to Delhi and form a movement.” Ram Babu replied, “Tell me, what should I do now? My maternal uncle's home was in Jessore. So, I've always had a heartfelt connection with the people of East Bengal. Your minister doesn't think about the well-being of his fellow countrymen, what can I do? In fact, Subrata Chatterjee and the rest are also unable to do anything.” In this manner, Ram Babu consoled us and said, “You guys did not listen to what I'd said and provoked Jyoti Babu. And then, why did you bring Kashikanta Maitra to Marichjhapi? You tried to play a political game.” Thus, he scolded me harshly as his tone betrayed a sense of hurt. After that, we made a plan through Jyotirmoy Dutta's wife and Jyoti Babu's P.A. Joykrishna

Ghosh's wife. They both used to teach in South Point school. A few days back, Raiharan Babu had been arrested from Kolkata by the Bengal police. They have surrendered him in the hands of Bhopal Police. At that point, Subrata Da, Jyotirmoy Dutta and I decided to meet Jaykrishna Ghosh to invite Jyoti Babu. But Raiharan Babu was present there. As soon as he came to the room, he said, "Jyoti Babu cannot be invited. Since I have already arrived here, let me take some time to understand the situation. Jyoti Babu cannot be invited to Marichjhapi." Everyone present there was stunned to hear this. I couldn't move further. Since he was my leader, I had to abide by his words. Then Subrata Da said, "It's up to you. If Raiharan thinks so, then so be it. But in my opinion, Jyoti Babu must be brought to Marichjhapi so that he sees the actual condition of the refugees and sympathizes with them. It might have worked in our favor." Since Raiharan didn't agree to the proposal, I had nothing more to say. I reported Goldar Babu, whom I used to call Jyatha Moshai, "This is the scenario. Raiharan Babu came and stopped us from inviting Jyoti Babu. We were going to Jyotirmoy Dutta, Subrata Da and Jaykrishna Ghosh to invite Jyoti Babu to come to Marichjhapi. He wanted to sit and have lunch with us. But Raiharan prohibited us from doing so." Goldar Babu kept his hand on my head and said, "If we could use the opportunity to bring Ram Da also, it would have been great. If Jyoti Babu came and ate with us, we could explain to him the actual condition of the refugees and he would also get to experience the scenario in his own eyes." In the meantime, the bureaucrats of the state, such as Rathin Sengupta, the Chief Secretary and Amiya Samanta, the Police Superintendent of North 24 Pgs. told me, "Debabrata, get away from Marichjhapi. Do one thing, go and convince your leaders that there is a stretch of alluvial land in Canning where 8-10 people can be accommodated. People who are currently living in Marichjhapi can go there and settle down."

Q: What was the political purpose behind Jyoti Babu's decision to evict you people from Marichjhapi?

D: I came across the political reason in the newspaper. It stated somewhat like, if the refugees are settled in Marichjhapi they might conspire with a certain political party in Bangladesh to call for a potential mass movement to unite both the parts of Bengal. This logic was unacceptable because it was not possible to develop a

contact with Bangladesh from the point they settled in the forest area of the Sundarbans.

Q : According to your opinion, did Jyoti Babu manipulate the central government or vice versa?

D: Of course, Jyoti Babu did the manipulation. Morarji's situation was precarious at that time as Charan Singh and Raj Narain resigned from the party. So, Morarji was in need of Jyoti Babu's help to be in the government. Jyoti Babu capitalised on the opportunity to actualise his eviction mission in Marichjhapi. It was decided among them that the refugees would have to pay the price of the weakness of both the governments.

Q: So, you think that the entire thing was executed according to Jyoti Babu's plan?

A: Yes, Jyoti Babu was instrumental behind all of this. He called me to say, "You all are surplus people of West Bengal. I cannot arrange for your settlement in this state. If you really want to live in WB, buy your own land here and then settle up. Since you are the citizens of India, we cannot drive you away like this. You can stay here but not as a collective entity taking possession of an entire island and by throwing political challenges at me. I will never accept this.

Ram Babu went to Marichjhapi but did not set foot on the island. Instead, he called Rangalal Goldar to his launch for discussion. When Goldar went into the launch, food was served to him. Ram Babu said, "Come, eat with me first, then we will discuss." Goldar retorted, "Dada, I am not going to eat with you like this. This will create a reaction amongst the refugees. They would get me wrong. So, I won't eat with you." Ram Babu said in reply, "Come to Writers' then. I will be there. Sit for a discussion with Jyoti Babu. Why are you throwing challenges at him? He is very upset with all of you." Subhas Chakraborty was still not there and so, we didn't know much about him.

Q: After this failure, did you have any contact with the party leadership?

D: Yes. That village Goldar Babu had managed to set up, 'Pather Sesh' or 'Pather Dabi' colony, Gourkishore Ghosh and Subrata Da was there from the beginning till

the end. Fund was collected from Jyotirmoy Dutta and Gauri Ayub to make the project successful.

Q: What is your occupation at present?

D : Currently, I am in the centering line. Building construction. These highrises and multiplexes of 14 or 24 stories that are being built up nowadays, I work in these projects as a fitter.

Q: What is Pabitra doing?

D: He is involved in casting in the buildings. I had contact with him even a month before. Now we are not in contact anymore. Construction was going on in a place called Rodkol in Nager Bazar. Pabitra took 400-500 casting laborers to work in that site.

Q: Can you name a few journalists we used to visit there?

D: Niranjan Halder used to go there as a journalist. I would often go with him. But I had a stronger connection with Jyotirmoy Dutta or Ajit Chakraborty which I did not have with Niranjan. Towards the end, Sashi Mukherjee, the reporter of Statesman went to Marichjhapi having collected the address from Subrata Da. But, the police massacre had already started by then. The Statesman published one photograph where a police personnel was kicking down a pregnant woman. Statesman had many such photographs which they never published.

Q: When you were driven away from Marichjhapi, what was the role of the police?

D: The approach of the police was absolutely ruthless. As I said, they kicked down pregnant women. And, the cadres of C.P.I(M) were equally brutal. They were also the perpetrators of this massacre. Police raided and smashed the houses down. Their aggression was similar to that of a ferocious tiger. It's true that the C.P.I(M) cadres also joined hands with them in Kumirmari and they jointly entered Marichjhapi. We were totally helpless. Our resistance shattered. Young men escaped. A few houses survived. Girls had no other option but to ride our boats. I reached Marichjhapi that very night. The day Kashikanta Maitra came, I arranged for banana leaves from the market as they were supposed to have a meal with us.

When I got the news, I reached there one hour earlier. Satish Babu had already sent the news that Kashikanta Maitra, Haripada Bharati, Shakti Sarkar, Kalidas Baidya and others were coming from Kolkata. I don't remember if Shaibal Dasgupta was there or not. Subrata Da was there, of course. Then, we cooked snakehead fish and lobster with arum. It felt as if we were reliving the experience of eating in a company as we used to do in Bangladesh. Kashikanta Moitra and Haripada Bharati could not help but express their nostalgia, "I feel I am eating rice sitting at Jessore of old days."

Marichjhapi was burning. So, the court ordered us to pay a visit. Subrata Da, Shaky Sen, Niharendu Datta Mazumder, Monoranjan Halder and I had gone to pay a visit. Monoranjan was a resident of Marichjhapi. We picked him up from Kumirmari and went together. We collected facts on how Marichjhapi was set on fire. Niharendu Dutta Mazumder, Shaky Sen, Subrata Da and I collected in a sack the broken bangles of women, ashes of burnt vermilion boxes and such things. We handed everything over to Shaky Sen and asked him to show it to the court. We had heard that a woman called Haribala Mondal was consumed by fire. But we did not have the scope to pay a visit. This incident was even reported in the newspaper. They were everywhere. Now I was in a dilemma if I should stay with my family or travel to all these places or send messages to Kolkata. Marichjhapi was a considerably big place where there were 20-30000 people. I could not communicate with so many people scattered all over. That night, I asked Goldar Babu to set out. Sekhar came along upto Kolkata. His purpose of coming here was to stop Jyoti Babu from going to Marichjhapi. We came to know about a suspicion that Jyoti Babu had in his mind. He even accused us of that. There was a muslim organization in Bangladesh who demanded greater Bengal. The assumption was that these two organizations namely, 'Nikhilbanga Nagorik Sangha' and 'Udbastu Unnoyonshil Samiti' were operating in West Bengal with a definite plan. They have settled here to such a point that Satish Mondal and Siddikul will give leadership in West Bengal and Bangladesh respectively - though I don't distinctly remember what was the actual scenario. These two things will lead to the formation of a united Bengal.

Q: Did you know anyone named Samir Samaddar?

D: Doctor Samir was a newcomer to Marichjhapi from Bangladesh. He used to treat patients here and there. Having come here, he saw that there were so many people in Marichjhapi but no doctor. Haripada Da used to request some doctors to go to Marichjhapi. One day he asked Samir to go to Marichjhapi as the place was in urgent need of doctors. So, Samir arrived here. People called Satish Mondal as Dharmababa since he would treat patients free of cost. The medicines we would collect were handed over to Samir for distribution. Dr. Kalidas Baidya was the one who led in the formation of a greater homeland. He stayed in Marichjhapi for a certain period of time as well. Jyoti Babu accused him of the conspiracy of forming a greater homeland. At that time, we didn't indulge much into explanation. Our mindset was simple, we used to go to those people who wanted to help us and if they wanted to visit Marichjhapi, we would take them there. Subrata Babu took me to P.R.Thakur of Matua Sangha. Subrata Babu told him, "Thakur Moshai, most of the people in Marichjhapi belong originally to Jessore, Khulna. If you kindly look after their needs, they will surely be benefited." P.R.Thakur said in reply, "Look, Subrata Babu, I am a religious person, it's your duty to fight for these people. My love and assistance for them depends on your work." Our condition was so terrible back then that we used to rush to anyone who promised us a handful of rice. The tottering Morarji Desai government in Delhi was on the verge of falling. We received help from Shakti Sarkar until he was an M.P. But after that, the central government didn't pay any attention to our needs. Kashikanta Maitra didn't provide us with any sort of financial help further. Whatever statement he gave was through newspapers. He didn't give us any financial help. When we first came to Hasnabad, we received immense help in the form of relief from Haripada Bharati. At that time, I went to Bijayananda Maharaj of 'Bharat Sebashram Sangha', Bishnukanta Sastri wrote a letter. . .I was delivering most of the letters rushing from one place to another.

Q: Has everyone got back to Dandakaranya?

D: Not everyone has gone back to Dandakaranya, there are still thousands of people living in Bengal. I was in touch with all of them and knew their whereabouts until recently. I still keep contact with them considering the fact that this might help us in future. For example, in Hasnabad, Basirhat, Barasat's Koida,

Kadamgachi most of these people are associated with the same profession like me, they are either masons or working in the centering line.

From the pages of Debabrata Biswas' diary

5.2.79

Today for the entire day until 11.15 pm, we were in Niharendu Dutta Mazumder's Palm Avenue house where a case was filed in the presence of Shaky Sen. After that, I went to stay at a house in North Kolkata. I did not have any familiarity with that house.

6.2.79

Today at 9.30 am, Amber Chattapadhyay took me to the house of Dutta Mazumder where we finished our due work.

7.2.79

Today we put up the case in room no. 14 which belonged to Mr. R.N.Paine.

8.2.79

Today we got the court order in favour of us. The entire courtroom overflowed with happiness. A large meeting was organised this afternoon at Sradhananda Park. All the intellectuals of Kolkata attended the meeting. Among the speakers, there were some eminent personalities like Shoibal Gupta, Jyotirmoy Dutta, literatur Sunil Gangopadhyay. This day was a historic day in my life.

9.2.79

Today I set out for Marichjhapi with Jyotirmoy Dutta, the journalist. At 8.30 pm, we reached Nazat. I feel so much admiration and love for this historic personality that he has become very close to my heart. We had to undergo much toil to reach Bagna today.

10.2.79

From as early as 3.30 am up until 1.30 at noon I stood at Bagna with the court order in my hand. This is another historic day in my life - it was as if the dying people of Marichjhapi were brought back to life. Behind me, thousands of people were screaming in unison - We won't be driven away. We will live. At 3 o'clock in the afternoon I took a small boat to start crossing the river. At night, I met Satish Babu and discussed the situation. Jyotirmoy Dutta, the journalist; Goldar Babu and Raiharan Babu were also present at that time.

11.2.79

Today there was much jubilation in the entire Netaji Nagar. When I came across Goldar Babu in the market he asked me to treat all of them with sweets. So I distributed 5 kilos of sweets among all the people over there. From morning to night sounds of cheerfulness and celebration could be heard in the locality.

Marichjhapi investigation at the order of the High Court

Shakya Sen

‘I have witnessed the crimes of the powerful go unpunished

While justice weeps in silence.’

These lines by Rabindranath Tagore can be considered a justified assessment of the condition of the refugees at Marichjhapi. Having received the verdict and order from the Calcutta High Court on 9th June 1979, I started my journey towards Marichjhapi on the 29th. With me I had barrister Nirahendu Mazumder, refugee leader Debabrata Biswas and some other personalities.

On 16th May 1979, the government of West Bengal finished the process of evicting the refugees from Marichjhapi. The High Court on behalf of the complainants, ordered the government lawyers to thoroughly investigate the massacre done by rulers, but none of them carried out this order.

When we reached Kumirmari from Hasnabad by launch crossing Ichamati, Sahebkhali, Raymongal and Puijali on the way, the sun was almost on the verge of

setting. Our accommodation was arranged in Kumirmari, at the opposite side of Marichjhapi. After a primary discussion with the residents of Kumirmari we came to know about the terrifying massacre that took place in Marichjhapi on 14th May, 1979. We were informed about the extent of police torture and how the goons set the entire locality on fire. The helpless people of Kumirmari had no option but to see the flames of fire consuming the entire land. Quite a number of refugees took shelter in Kumirmari to get rid of the tortures inflicted by the perpetrators of the Left Front government. When we came to know about their account of the massacre, we were shaken to the core by hearing the intensity of ruthlessness.

24th June, 1979 : At about 7 o'clock in the morning a boat was arranged to take us to Marichjhapi. I cannot help but narrate a small yet significant incident that happened at that time. When our boat was moving forward along the shore, suddenly we saw a kid of 5 or 6 years of age running hurriedly in the direction of our boat. It felt as if he was beckoning us. Having stopped the boat when we asked him what happened, he started crying and uttered his wish to go with us to Marichjhapi. He had a home there. His helplessness touched us so deeply that we could not abandon him. We were not certain whether we would be able to find his home as the entire locality was gutted by fire. Even today I remember his name, 'Jeebon' (Life).

At 9 o'clock our boat reached Marichjhapi. We did not see any big trees in Marichjhapi. The bushes we came across were mostly either mangrove trees or some sort of spinach. This type of spinach was basically a form of long grass. When the Left Front government blockaded the entire island of Marichjhapi and stopped all possible food supply from outside, people over there had no other option but to survive by eating this type of spinach.

We noticed that Marichjhapi was a triangular island. Korankhali and Goral rivers were on the two sides of the island. I don't remember the name of the third river. This Korankhali river was also known as Marichjhapi river. Looking at the island from the boat we could estimate the extent of destruction that the land experienced. Nearby, we were shown the crematorium and the statue of Bonbibi. These two things remained unharmed. When the boat reached the shore of Marichjhapi and we set foot on the island, the first thing we came across was absolutely inhuman, horrific and terrifying. Thousands of houses had been razed to the ground. The

belongings of the refugees were gutted and scattered all over. The destruction was done so ruthlessly that it looked as if a number of bulldozers had demolished the inhabitat like a demon. Consumed by fire, the daily objects of the household such as furnitures, cauldrons, utensils, cloths, books etc were bearing the witness of this devastation. We could collect a bangle made of shell from that place which might have belonged to some hapless woman. From the boat we saw the crematorium of Marichjhapi but having landed there we could realise that the whole island has turned into a crematorium. Violating the order by the High Court dated 7th February 1979, the whole operation was carried out. The prohibition was enforced upon the Left Front government. In Marichjhapi, we witnessed this court order as if rolling on the ground where the basic rights and efforts of human survival were completely destroyed.

The refugees while staying in Marichjhapi indulged in prawn farming. We saw those ranches had been destroyed and all the fishes were stolen. Suddenly we noticed a boat from the forest department was anchored on the bank of the river and a fishing net was spread on the water for catching prawns. When we reached near the spot, someone came out from the boat. He looked dissatisfied. He did not bother to answer any of our questions. He only said that his name was Mr. Shil without mentioning his first name.

In the meantime, we were going ahead keeping our eyes on the things around us. Having covered a little distance, we were suddenly confronted by a few people dressed in Khaki uniforms. They stopped us and started asking questions to intimidate us. We were told that we should stop our inspection and go back from Marichjhapi. We should not click any pictures or write notes. One among them was an officer named Kartickchandra Sarkar. He told me directly that clicking pictures is not allowed and he would stop us from doing so. Then they started following us. To avoid further nuisance I couldn't take any more photos. Kartickchandra Sarkar informed us that we should take permission from the higher officials to continue our inspection in Marichjhapi and one such officer was sitting in a government boat on the other side of the river. Meanwhile a few more khaki uniformed officers came to us and threatened us by saying loudly that we won't be allowed to continue our inspection in Marichjhapi until we take permission from the higher

officials. We showed them the order from the High Court and kept on conducting our inspection. But we lost some important time due to this continuous obstruction.

However, here are some details of the information we could gather from our inspection in Marichjhapi.

1. In the premises of Netaji Nagar Vidyapith there is a playground. 1700 students used to study in the school up to class 8 standard. The rooms were all found in a dilapidated condition where the tables, chairs etc. were kept in a heap at one corner. We saw a martyr's tomb there which was still unharmed. The flag of the 'Udbastu Unnoyonshil committee' or the picture of Netaji, everything had disappeared.
2. Outside Netaji Nagar Vidyapith, we were shown the remnants of a straw-thatched restroom that is in ruins. If any guest came from outside, he used to stay here.
3. The Marichjhapi hospital - to build this a lot of money and labour were invested. Now we saw with our own eyes the structure of the building that had been completely gutted was standing alone. The beds, furniture and all the associated things had vanished.
4. We were shown the marketplace. We came across a few straw-thatched roofs but most of them were either gutted or demolished. To make this market, the refugees had to spend a lot of money.
5. 'Marichjhapi Bidi' - The bidi and the loaf factory had been completely demolished and razed to the ground.
6. The broken tools of the blacksmiths were scattered here and there.
7. We saw a jewellery shop in ruins - the remnants of the building and the tools of the goldsmith were scattered all over.
8. We came across many tube wells which were totally dysfunctional.
9. The fish ranches were ruthlessly destroyed. The residents of Marichjhapi used to farm prawn, grey mullet, bayasi and different other fishes for their livelihood which opened up a possibility of income as huge as 5-6 crores per year. The fishes had disappeared from the ranches overnight.
10. Moving ahead a little, we were taken aback to witness the intensity of ruthlessness. The looted objects, such as, furniture, cauldrons, utensils, tables, chairs, thatches, beddings etc. gathered from the houses of the

refugees who were evicted from the land, were lying in a heap for auction. The heap was divided into several numbered lots. We saw numbers like 24, 87, 100 upto 122.

When we were moving further, a group of 15-16 people hindered our progress. They claimed themselves to be employees of the Forest Department and started charging us by saying that we wouldn't be allowed to continue this inspection. We were told not to take any pictures and to go back from Marichjhapi. They asked who had given us the right to enter Marichjhapi and if we had any evidence of that. We informed them about our identity and showed the transcript of the court order. But that bore no fruit as we were asked to take permission from the senior government officer to conduct this inspection. Despite being continuously hindered and threatened, we didn't pay heed to their words and started to move forward.

We were supposed to go back to Kumirmari within 1 pm because we had planned to return Kolkata timely by launch.

The continuous nuisance created by the Forest Department employees caused significant disruptions in our inspection and in the process, a great deal of time was wasted. So, we decided to put an end to our inspection and go back.

When we came to the end of Marichjhapi island and were about to set foot on the boat, we were suddenly confronted by an officer who charged at the top of his voice pointing at us sitting in a government launch, "Arrest them." Then he got down from his launch and stopped us from getting into the boat. Along with him, the other uniformed officials also became violent and were about to attack us. When we wanted to know the designation of the officer, he said he was the Assistant Field Director of the Tiger Project. He claimed to have proper rights for arresting us. We were enquired about our purpose of coming to Marichjhapi. We showed him the court order to substantiate our rights. He was not satisfied with that evidence and started questioning our identity. Needless to say, the nature of ill treatment we received from that person, we never thought of receiving this behavior from a high ranking official. Then we started to confront him directly. We asked for his identity card. We wanted to know on what basis he was hindering our way and trying to arrest us. We told him that we had come for inspection as per the order given by the High Court and the concerning lawyer. Hence, if he stops us

from doing our job, that will be counted as a contempt of court which can lead to severe consequences. So, after considering the aftermath, if he wants to arrest us, he can do so.

Hearing this, the officer did not have the courage to proceed. Instead, he spoke softly, “My name is Samir Banerjee. As a government employee, I am just doing my job.” Then a strange thing happened. Mr. Banerjee requested us to write a small note on a piece of paper stating the fact that he had shown his 'protest' against us in the matter of inspecting Marichjhapi. He wanted to show this paper to the higher authority to demand that he had done his duty. Hence, we wrote a small note and signed it so that he could save his job. It was 24th June, 1979.

On that day, we managed to return hurriedly to Kumirmari and start for Kolkata. When we were leaving Kumirmari, a lot of local people came to bid us farewell. There were some people amongst them who took shelter in Kumirmari after being uprooted from Marichjhapi. They were waiting for justice as they narrated their inexplicable suffering to us.

We came back to Kolkata that day with the burden of all these horrifying experiences. Having returned, we wrote all the incidents that we encountered, did an affidavit and submitted that to the honourable High Court.

I can't help but say that the people who faced injustice in its most brutal form in Marichjhapi, are yet to receive their due justice.

Historical 'Marichjhapi Case 1979'

Soumen Guha

Currently, Marichjhapi is a symbolic name for monstrous state repression, violence and genocide against the refugees in West Bengal as well as in India.

The perpetration of this massacre happened in 1978-79. It has not been well documented in newspapers and consequently has remained buried in the grave of silence. But after almost 30 years, the memories of those horrific days are being taken into account in the discourse of the present political scenario. The survivors

of the massacre are now scattered all over the country in search of livelihood, in order to survive. Those infants are now grown ups, those grown ups have aged over time and the aged have already breathed their last.

Almost 30000 people who were affected by the genocide were but human beings. They were citizens of India and most importantly they were Bengalis. They were neither foreigners, nor any miscreants. Then why did these harmless people become the victims of state sponsored violence?

These homeless and shelterless people being uprooted from their own lands came here to live with human dignity. Their drive for a better living condition made them turn an uninhabitable land into a properly habitable one and with that zeal for survival they constructed schools, arranged for work opportunities and developed infrastructure for a labour-based livelihood. Every country of the world shares the same history regarding the nature of human civilization. But history suggests that the rulers of the world who situate themselves on the top of the pyramid of exploitation consider this activity of people as an 'offence'.

Today, hidden under the horrifying events of Marichjhapi, there is one particular chapter that has remained unpronounced. The refugees fought a legal battle against all the atrocities and brutality inflicted upon them. They appealed to the High Court for justice. This was a historical battle which deserves utmost importance.

I will discuss this matter here with substantial factual details. The factual and linguistic source of my discussion is solely based on the legal case filed in the Calcutta High Court regarding the Constitutional rights demanded by the refugees of Marichjhapi. To add to this, I will also provide further analysis and facts in the end.

The first legal letter of protest against the atrocities took place in Marichjhapi

Before presenting the letter of appeal in the High Court, on behalf of Debabrata Biswas, a victim of Marichjhapi massacre, 'Udbastu Unnayan Committee (All India) and 'Amra Bangali Songothon'; Shakyo Sen sent a legal letter to various departments of the central and the state government protesting against this torture and injustice. The letter was sent to 8 places on 3rd February, 1979.

1. To the Relief and Rehabilitation Secretary, a representative of the central government.
2. To the Chief Secretary, a representative of the state government.
3. To the Chief Minister of West Bengal.
4. To the Secretary of the West Bengal Home Ministry.
5. To Radhika Banerjee, the minister of the Relief and Rehabilitation Department, West Bengal.
6. To the District Magistrate of 24 Pargana.
7. To the Inspector General of Police, West Bengal.
8. To the Superintendent of Police, 24 Pargana.

This letter is important in the context of the cause of action for the next appeal to the Constitution at the Kolkata High Court. Because, none took any further step on behalf of the West Bengal government in return to this letter. A brief description of the state sponsored violence was included in the letter for the awareness of the government. The following points were mentioned in the letter:

1. At Netaji Nagar which falls under Gosaba P.S. and known as Marichjhapi, almost 30000 Indian citizens were residing peacefully and living a self-reliant life since April 1978.
2. From August 1978 onwards, the government and other miscreants from the aforementioned locality, violating the Constitution of India's 14, 15(1), 19(1), 21, 31 sections of law and neglecting natural justice completely, had launched an illegal attack on the residents of Marichjhapi and had taken away their lives and belongings.
3. The perpetration of this violent attack on the innocent citizens is done on a war footing. Speed boats had been deployed to destroy the local boats of the residents. Tear gas and deadly bullets were used to disperse local people who were busy trying to save men, women and children from drowning. Food and water supply were completely stopped by creating a blockade engaging policemen and launches. It was the worst nightmare. Cold blooded murder of the innocent citizens eventually turned into a genocide. After the partition, thousands of Bengalis have been ruthlessly killed over the years and these tales of woe and misery have been recorded with their blood and tears.

In the letter the residents of Marichjhapi stated their urgent demands, such as, to secure justice from the recipient of the letter, to withdraw all speed boats and policemen from the island, to quit all sorts of gherao and blockade, to bring back normalcy by putting an end to this warlike atmosphere, to create a provision for peaceful business and to resume all the activities related to rehabilitation without any obstructions.

The letter stated that 24 hours will be allotted to the government to carry out their demands. It was informed that, if the government did not act accordingly, the agitated masses and the victims of Marichjhapi would have no other option but to go for an alternative solution which would be legal and constitutional.

The government did not bother to respond to this letter. Hence, the victims of Marichjhapi, in order to reclaim their legal and constitutional rights, filed an appeal to the Calcutta High Court under Article 226. The copy of this letter was attached with the appeal.

Appeal to the Calcutta High Court by the victims of Marichjhapi

On 5th February 1979, at the Calcutta High Court, an affidavit for the constitutional appeal was prepared. On 6th February the filed at the court which was registered with the serial no. 'Civil Order No. 371(W) of 1979.

There were three main appellants were - Debabrata Biswas, on behalf of the victims of the Marichjhapi massacre; 'Udbastu Unnoyon Samiti' (All India) of Marichjhapi's Netaji Nagar; Ambar Chatterjee, the President of the organization named 'Amra Bangali'.

In that appeal, the following 8 people were marked as the opposition:

1. The Relief and Rehabilitation Secretary, a representative of the central government.
2. The Chief Secretary, a representative of the state government.
3. The Chief Minister of West Bengal.
4. The Secretary of the West Bengal Home Ministry.

5. Radhika Banerjee, the minister of the Relief and Rehabilitation Department, West Bengal.
6. The District Magistrate of 24 Pargana.
7. The Inspector General of Police, West Bengal.
8. The Superintendent of Police, 24 Pargana.

The contents of the charges brought against the government in that written appeal submitted to the High Court as per section 226 of the Indian Constitution are as follows:

1. By hindering the supply of necessary goods to the residents of Marichjhapi who were Indian citizens as well, their regular flow of life had been dismantled. With the assistance of the central government, the government of West Bengal launched a brutal and illegal attack on the refugees. The central and the state government worked as a combined force to unleash bullets illegally on the refugees irrespective of their gender and age in order to restore the rule of law. In this manner, they completely destroyed the honor and sovereignty of the Indian Republic and the Constitution of India.
2. Article 14 of the Constitution of India was violated as the residents of Marichjhapi were completely denied equality before the law or equal protection of the laws within the territory of India.
3. The rights stated in Article 15(A) of the Constitution of India had been violated as the residents of Marichjhapi were treated with discrimination.
4. Sub-section (d) and (e) of Article 19 had been completely violated as the citizens of India were illegally and unconstitutionally denied rights to move freely or reside in their own lands .
5. Sub-section (e) and (f) of Article 19 had been completely violated as the residents of Marichjhapi were illegally and unconstitutionally denied rights to continue doing their business or earn their livelihood. The state also failed to guarantee its citizens the right to secure their property.
6. Violating Article 21 of the Constitution of India, the state deprived the residents of Marichjhapi of their right to live and the right to personal liberty.
7. By curtailing the right to property of the residents of Marichjhapi the government violated the Article 31 of the Constitution of India.

8. The government of West Bengal negated all the Basic Principles, the Fundamental rights and the Directive Principles stated in the Constitution of India.

9. With the support of the central government, the government of West Bengal, ignoring all the duties of a welfare state and violating the constitutional rights of people of an independent country, perpetrated an aggressive attack on the refugees at Marichjhapi.

The historical petition to protect constitutional rights began with the depiction of the appellants' social and geographical identity which was followed by the description of the backdrop and the situation leading to their migration to Marichjhapi.

In the report dealing with the government's factual details regarding Marichjhapi, we had to depend on the survey map of British India curated in 1924-29 and the revised version (1936) of a map curated in 1912-14. The refugee settlements were found in the areas like Gosaba Police Station in 24 Parganas (Currently South 24 Parganas), Kumirmari Post Office and Netaji Nagar in Kumirmari. This area had Jhilli Nadi to the east, Korankhali, Satjelia and Hamilton plantation to the north and north-west, Rangabaulia canal to the west and greenery of the Sundarbans to the south.

April 1978 onwards, almost 30,000 people had built their inhabitant in Marichjhapi as Indian citizens. They took zero assistance from the government. They were extremely determined and self-reliant to protect their rights to life and liberty. They were successful in fulfilling every aspect of a healthy life that comprises food, clothing, shelter, education, ingredients for culture and entertainment, occupation and business.

Without harming the environment, within a short span of time, they set up a blacksmith factory for manufacturing agricultural equipment; a pottery for making clay utensils; looms for weaving clothes and mats from local grass, a factory for building local boats; arrangement for making bidi, sweets, bread, handwoven bamboo baskets, carpentry, wooden vrata etc. Not only that, they also involved

themselves in agriculture, animal husbandry, fishery and farming for their livelihood. Alongside, the refugees established a medium school with local teachers, a hospital for their treatment, four doctor's clinics, two local markets etc.

The appellants asked for permission to show the photographs of all these activities to the court during the hearing, if necessary. From these photographs it was evident that the casuarina, palm and coconut trees planted by the government for the beautification of the forest were not damaged at all. Rather, the number of trees increased during their stay at Marichjhapi.

Despite all this, the government, having completely disregarded the law, inflicted inhuman tortured and imposed economic blockade on 30,000 helpless refugees. Being left with no alternative, the refugees tried to survive on the weeds and spinach that grew in the embankment.

The next part of the petition contains the description of the violence. Following that, there is a description of the consequences of the revolutionary activities during the struggle for independence and of partition.

In the petition submitted to the Calcutta High Court, there is an appeal to stop unconstitutional state violence against the refugees at Marichjhapi violating their fundamental rights to life and liberty and to reestablish their constitutional and fundamental rights.

Description of Marichjhapi Massacre in the petition submitted to the Calcutta High Court

In the petition submitted to the Calcutta High Court, the following sample accounts have been narrated by the victims of state oppression at Marichjhapi where they have given detailed description of the massacre:

1. On 20th August 1978, at about 3 o'clock in the afternoon, the government of West Bengal made use of 30 launches to blockade the entire island and to put pressure on its residents. They blocked every possible way to secure

water and other necessary resources from the other side of the river. Consequently, people were suffering from a severe water crisis. Deprived of water, infants, women and people in general started wailing as they were unable to beat the unbearable heat. There was no proper arrangement of tubewells or drinking water.

Volunteers and social workers in large numbers appealed to governmental launches to allow them to send drinking water and other essentials. But it bore no fruit. The blockading continued until 8 at night.

2. At about 9/10 pm on 20th August, when all of this was happening, S. Chatterjee, the president of 'Nikhilbanga Nagorik Sangha' sent a phonogram to the Prime Minister Morarji Deshai. Copies of that phonogram were also sent to the members of the parliament as well namely Subramonium Swami, Shakti Sarkar, Charan Singh amongst others.

'Prime minister, your kind attention is drawn to the planned massacre of innocent refugees at Marichjhapi, Sundarban, in your name. Please take a realistic stock of the situation and kindly allow them independently to establish their stay irrespective of any political compulsion.

About ten thousand built their huts economic fisheries starting paying dividend regenerating economy locally. Now seems being brutally uprooted by L.F. Government in connivance with yours who is probably ignorant of the exact situation.

REQUEST IMMEDIATELY STOP MARICHJHAPI OPERATION TOMORROW AND RESPECT WHOLE CULTURAL BENGALIS HEART.

S. Chatterjee
Secretary
Nikhil Banga Nagrik Sangha'

3. In the same manner, on 21st August 1978, throughout the entire day, the government carried out their operation of harassment and blockading. When

it was evident that any appeal to the government would not change the situation, thousands of refugees took out a protest rally. Consequently, at about 10.45 pm, a higher official called for negotiation with the protesters. He asked for a resolution which would impose a number of unjustified and unrealistic conditions on the refugees in exchange for some relaxations of the blockade. But the gherao and blockade continued until 28th of August.

4. On August 21, at 12.45 pm, S.Chatterjee, the president of 'Nikhilbanga Nagorik Sangha' sent another phonogram to the Prime Minister of India. Copies of that phonogram were sent to the other members of the parliament, namely, Subhranarayan Swami, Shakti Sarkar, Jagjivan Ram, the Minister of Defence and K.B.Malkani. The account of the phonogram (It was transcribed in the letter of appeal to the High Court):

'Prime Minister, humbly appeal - Stop further massacre operation on Marichjhapi Sundarban refugees. Today all launch services were suspended there since officially large contingent forces were sent not for just requesting return to Dandak. Repeat appeal to P.M and man Morarji must know the real situation before making Turkaman Gate plus Jallianwala Bagh blunder Must . . . politics rule or Central Government and Civilized India. Kindly act.'

5. From 6th September 1978 onwards, the state government and other opposition forces marked as 1, 3, 5, 7, 8 in the petition to the High Court started deploying mechanical boats planfully to destroy the local boats possessed by the residents of Marichjhapi. At least 200 boats were either seized or destroyed, 63 riders are still missing, more than 6 people were shot among whom 2 have already died. Those 400 people who rowed out for Marichjhapi have been severely injured. All the incidents happened in the presence of the district magistrate and the superintendent of police, North 24 Pgs.
6. On 6th September 1978, the governmental launch named 'MV Devjan' rammed into and destroyed several local boats. It subsequently ran over the boaters who had already started drowning. A few were injured at the blow of

its propeller blade. When the locals gathered on the bank of the river to save these imperiled people, tear gas shells were thrown at them from the launch.

7. On 28th January 1979, the local women of Marichjhapi rowed out to Kumirmari on 3 boats to secure drinking water. Their boats were rammed into by police launches. Being agitated at this, when the people of Kumirmari rose out in protest, 5 rounds of bullets were shot at them and 4 rounds of tear gas shells were thrown in the direction of the boats. 3 severely injured women are fighting for their life.
8. On 29th January 1979, governmental forces destroyed the fisheries belonging to the residents of Marichjhapi. Consequently, fish farming was heavily hampered as salt water flooded into the fisheries. When the victims protested, police used tear gas to put them down. So, in this way, Mahadeb Mondal, Sunil, Ashwini Sarkar, Renuka Mondal, Malati Paul got heavily injured. Following this, at 1 o'clock at night, only to threaten the residents of the island, police fired 6 rounds of tear gas.
9. On 31st January 1979, at around 2 pm, when some locals were returning to Marichjhapi securing food and other essential objects, police arrested them without any proper complaint or warrant and locked them up in Kumirmari police camp.

At this, local people got extremely agitated and rose up in protest. They wanted to swim away to Kumirmari. 30 died as police opened fire at them. Many women and children were injured. The corpses were secretly thrown at the sea by the governmental forces.

In the petition, this incident has been considered to be bearing a striking resemblance to the Jalianwalah Bagh massacre.

Stay Order Issued by the High Court against Marichjhapi Massacre and Governmental Activities

At the Calcutta High Court, advocate Shakya sen spoke in favor of the petition. Advocate Snehanshu Acharyya was the representative of the government of West Bengal. On 7th February 1979, initially after hearing the accounts of both sides, Justice R.N.Pain issued a stay order.

‘The respondents are restrained from interfering with or creating any obstruction to the supplies of essential commodities such as drinking water, milk, medicine including disinfectantes, foodstuff and clothes, etc. to the petitioners and other inhabitants of Marichjhapi. The respondents are also restrained from interfering with the petitioners’ and other inhabitants’ right of ingress and egress from Marichjhapi.’

For the residents of Marichjhapi this stay order, that too obtained in such a short while, was a huge triumph.

Despite having this stay order, the government of West Bengal carried on their operation of violence and oppression both publicly and furtively.

In this regard, two consecutive supplementary petitions were filed in the High Court. In those petitions, it was mentioned that the government is violating the order of the High Court by doing such illegal activities. So, to witness the actual condition of Marichjhapi, the High Court should appoint a commission which would consist of lawyers from both sides.

In spite of having the stay order dated 7th February 1979, on 7th May 1979, along with a group of hired goons and 250 policewomen, a force of 2500 armed personnel attacked the houses of Marichjhapi residents, beat local people up, drove them away and set their houses on fire which resulted in the death of many infants, men and women.

The main petitioners filed a supplementary petition to the court whereby they listed the names and signatures of 240 people who were the victims of police violence and massacre.

In the meantime, only two review petitions were submitted to the Court on behalf of the government by the Secretary of Home Affairs and Amiya Kumar Samanta, the Superintendent of Police. Chief Minister Jyoti Basu, Relief and Rehabilitation minister Radhika Banerjee and others did not submit any review petition. The case was also shifted to the ejlas of Justice B.C.Basak from that of R.N.Pain. On 19th June 1979, Justice B.C.Basak (Bimal Chandra Basak) ordered that since the matter has been outdated, a new affidavit must be prepared and submitted to the court. For this, on behalf of the appellants, advocate Niharendu Dutta Mazumder and Shakya Sen were asked to go to Marichjhapi with prior notice to the opposition lawyers. After witnessing the actual situation in Marichjhapi they would submit an affidavit to the court. The opposition was directed to provide full assistance to the lawyers of the appellants during their inspection in Marichjhapi.

Marichjhapi Inspection by the Lawyers

In another supplementary petition (July 1979), the appellants informed the Court about the condition of Marichjhapi and the account of the lawyers' inspection in Marichjhapi.

On 23rd June 1979, at 8 am, with the assistance of the appellants, advocate Niharendu Dutta Mazumder and Shakya sen arrived at Hasnabad by car from Kolkata. From there, they ferried across the Ichamati river in a regular launch. At about 6.30 pm, when the appellants took their lawyers to Kumirmari, local residents and people evicted from Marichjhapi welcomed them. They were seated at a tea shop where a gathering of helpless people started to narrate their experiences of inexplicable suffering. Shakya Sen carried a tape recorder with him so that he could record the accounts of their horrific experiences. These horrifying details included how their houses were set on fire, how so many helpless people were rendered homeless overnight, how such innocent infants, women and elders were mercilessly beaten by rod and were forced to travel to Hasnabad or some other unknown places in pre-arranged launches. Their accounts speak volumes about the nature of ruthless massacre perpetrated at the instruction of the Chief Minister Jyoti Basu.

The appellants wrote to the High Court that if necessary, they can present the cassette of the recorded accounts and the individual speakers either in front of the commission or in advance.

The residents of Kumirmari and Marichjhapi went on narrating their dreadful experiences of persecution they had undergone. And, at the same time they were also speaking about the formation of this inhabitant and the things associated with it, i.e. agriculture; fishing; bread, salt, bidi, handicrafts and other sources of income etc. The aggressive and inhuman nature of the government of West Bengal destroyed every bit of what they had managed to procure. Even from Kumirmari, the traces of this devastation could be seen.

Both the lawyers stayed at Kumirmari that night.

On 24th June 1979, at about 6-7 in the morning, along with the appellants the lawyers set out for Marichjhapi in a boat. At that moment, they saw a boy coming towards them from Kumirmari. He wanted to return to his home in Marichjhapi. The boy had no idea that his house had been completely burned out. We took him with us. At around 9 am, the boat reached Marichjhapi.

As soon as they set foot in Marichjhapi, they saw that the entire island was in ruins. As the lawyers moved further, they came across nothing but the wreckage of the houses. The belongings of the residents, furniture, utensils, papers - everything was ravaged and scattered all over. A white conch was found on the way which bears the testimony of physical exploitation of a hapless woman. It looked like a demon had ravaged the entire island.

On the way, the appellants and the lawyers encountered a few khaki uniformed men who suddenly appeared from the bushes. They hindered the lawyers' inspection and asked them to stop taking notes or clicking pictures. If not obstructed, advocate Shakya sen would have taken more photos of the wreckage. Kartick Chandra sarkar, a guy from the group of khaki uniformed men, did not accept the High Court's order. Rather, he asked the lawyers to take permission from the officers who were sitting in a launch at the opposite side of the river. While this conversation was going on, more people flocked in and started to say the same

thing to the lawyers. They even threatened to arrest the lawyers. They were not ready to accept the fact that the lawyers did not need any further permission as they already had the High Court's order. It was evident that these men in khanki were manipulated to disobey the order of the High Court.

As a result, the task of inspection undertaken by the lawyers remained incomplete. Still, they were able to take note of some significant traces of the massacre:

1. 'Netaji Nagar Vidyapith' was one of the very few schools situated in that locality. About 1700 students used to study in the school up to class 8 standard. The school was closed down completely as the rooms were all found in a dilapidated condition where tables and chairs were kept in a heap at one corner. The statue of Netaji had disappeared. Outside the school, only the remnants of a straw-thatched restroom for the guests was visible.
2. The Azad Hind Hospital of Marichjhapi was set ablaze. Only the structure of the building survived. The beds, furniture and all the associated things had vanished.
3. The ravages of the doctor's clinic were found. A photo was captured of a sign board that was rolling on the ground.
4. At the market, a good number of shops were demolished or set ablaze. To set up the bazaar, almost 2 crores of rupees had been invested.
5. The well-known bidi and loaf factory had been completely knocked down and razed to the ground by the goons deployed by the government. The factories were considered as a possession of pride by the residents.
6. The broken tools and half-made objects of the blacksmiths were scattered here and there.
7. The one and only jewelry shop of the area was completely demolished. Only the ruins could be found.
8. The fisheries were ruthlessly destroyed. The goons deployed by the government had planfully looted all the fish. The residents of Marichjhapi used to farm prawn, gray mullet, bayasi and different other fishes for their livelihood which opened up a possibility of income as huge as 5-6 crores per year.

9. The wells made by the residents of Marichjhapi at their own cost had been severely damaged by the police and the goons.

Amidst all this, the casuarina and the coconut trees stood tall, unharmed.

The appellants could now submit these evidences of massacre to the High Court.

The lawyers in favor of the appellants were taken aback to see that the debris of looted materials, such as, furniture, tables, chairs, bamboos, damaged utensils, cots, business goods and other important things were heaped up in a corner for illegal auctioning. The heap was separated into various lots and marked with numbers, i.e. 'bill no 85'. Upto bill no. 122 had already been placed there.

The appellants wrote a separate appeal to the High Court to stop this illegal auctioning.

Following this incomplete inspection, when the lawyers were about to set off for Kumirmari in a launch at 1pm, a suited-booted officer shouted from the government launch, "Arrest them." Few other men joined the officer and came running in to stop the boat. When asked, the officer identified himself as the 'Assistant field officer' of the Tiger Project and threatened the lawyers, "If I want, I can arrest anyone on this island." He asked, "Why are the lawyers conducting this inspection? Why are they taking photos?" When the lawyers challenged the officer, it was found out that there was no evidence in favor of his holding such an official post. His name was Samir Banerjee. The lawyers informed him, "Your behavior is nothing but a contempt of court. If you want, you can arrest us." The officer replied that he was simply following the instructions of his higher-up. So, if the lawyers could give him a note with a statement that he had 'objected' to continue the inspection or to click pictures in Marichjhapi, his responsibility would be fulfilled. Accordingly, the lawyers gave him the note and collected a dated receipt from him in return.

The appellants sought permission to file a case for contempt of court against this officer Samar Banerjee and his instructor, Chief Minister Jyoti basu.

Having reached Kumirmari, the lawyers came across a large number of devastated families who were desperate to go back to Marichjhapi. They were ready to narrate

the horrifying events from their experiences in front of the commission set up by the High Court.

In the supplementary petition (July 1979), the appellants presented all the facts they had gathered from their inspection and requested the court to form a commission for inspecting the situation in Marichjhapi.

Statement Given by the Government in the High Court

I have already mentioned that none except for the Secretary of Home Affairs and the Superintendent of Police Amiya kumar Samanta on the part of the government had filed a counter affidavit to the High Court. Chief Minister Jyoti Basu, Relief and Rehabilitation minister Radhika Banerjee and others did not submit any counter affidavit.

In an addendum to record on appeal (July 1979), the appellants brought this issue to the attention of the court. On 8th November, Amiya Kumar Samanta, Superintendent of Police (North 24 Page) provided a number of false information in his counter affidavit. The appellants wrote in the petition that on the basis of the facts a criminal case can be filed against Amiya Kumar Samanta for this falsehood. They also formally appealed to the court for conducting an interrogation of Mr. Samanta.

Amiya Kumar Samanta, in his counter affidavit, dated 19th June 1979, made a false statement regarding the directive of the court, that is - “the deserters from Dandakaranya who forcibly occupied the reserve forest have since left Marichjhapi.”

These facts were not there in the directives given by the court. The residents of Marichjhapi were not deserters from Dandakaranya. They did not occupy a reserved area of the forest. The residents of Marichjhapi took prior permission from the authority for their business initiatives, they never occupied the land forcibly.

Marichjhapi was never a reserved forest. For the first time it was labeled as one.

In his counter affidavit, although Mr. Samanta acknowledged the intrusion of police in Marichjhapi, he denied all the instances of violence and torture. He writes, 'In order to persuade the deserters to leave Marichjhapi and render help to them so that they could leave Marichjhapi peacefully.' He did not mention any name, instead he stated that the people of Marichjhapi took 'all possible assistance for smooth movement out of Marichjhapi and onward journey to places of settlement in Dandakaranya.' The appellants, in their addendum to record on appeal, informed the court that these are all false statements.

On 5th March 1979, The Secretary of Home Affairs presented his affidavit to the court. In this affidavit he writes, more than 1 lakh refugees left Dandakaranya for West Bengal and settled in the vicinity of Kolkata. The state government set up various camps for them. The government was successful in sending back almost 1 lakh people to Dandakaranya but close to 8-10 thousand people settled in Marichjhapi and built their inhabitat in that island. They did not care to listen to the government. A few active leaders among them refused to go back to Marichjhapi and engaged in illegal business. They started to destroy the forest and kill wild animals. This area was close to Bangladesh's Khulna. A rumor spread that people started migrating to Marichjhapi in order to settle down. The state government can only provide assistance for rehabilitation but when it is a question of forceful occupation and destruction of forestland, they must intervene. According to the secretary of Home Affairs,

'..... there is no place as such called 'marichjhapi', in Sundarbans. The area which has been forcibly occupied by the deserters, is in Jhilla Block of the Reserved Forest in Sundarbans which has not come to be popularly known as Marichjhapi. I also state there is no area in said Jhilla Block known as 'Netaji Nagar'.'

According to the facts provided by the secretary of the Home Affairs, 30 thousand people were not there in Marichjhapi. He not only repudiated all the allegations made by the appellants, but also claimed that the settlers used deadly weapons against the police and other government workers. On top of that, due to their illegal activities, complaints had been lodged against them in Sandeshkhali and Gosaba police stations.

Both Amiya kumar Samanta and the Secretary of Home Affairs in their affidavit to the court totally refuted the facts regarding police atrocities, brutal manifestation of state violence and the economic blockade. Although, Mr. Samanta has mentioned the death of 2 people, one man and one woman, which happened on 31st January, 1979.

On the part of the government, the following oral arguments were presented to the High Court:

1. Debabrata Biswas has no individual or fundamental right to appeal in favor of the refugees of Marichjhapi.
2. Casuarina trees have been annihilated.
3. Aggressiveness of the refugees.
4. The officers of the state government tried to peacefully convince the refugees to move out of the island without putting any undue pressure on them.

Naranarayan Gupta, the advocate from the government's side, emphasized much upon the argument that Marichjhapi was a reserved forestland. According to Article 26 of Indian Forest Act, 1927, the intervention and activities of the government are considered to be justified. This was the prime weapon of the government in this case.

The Final Verdict Announcing the Defeat of the Appellants in 'Marichjhapi Case 1979' at the High Court

At last, on 13th July 1979, in the final verdict given by Justice Bimal Chandra Basak, the historical battle of the victims of Marichjhapi ended in a defeat.

On behalf of the appellants, Shakya Sen and Niharendu Dutta Mazumder were present in the court. Advocate D.N.Das and Archana Sengupta were present as opposition lawyers. On behalf of the government, Advocate Naranarayan Gupta, A.P.Sarkar and P.R.Mondal were present in the court.

The main section of the verdict as announced by Justice Bimal Chandra Basak began like this,

‘In my opinion, this application is totally misconceived. This land belongs to the Government. This is the reserved forest within the meaning of Indian Forest Act 1927.’

So, these words contain the substance of their defeat. A major part of the verdict had a prolonged account of the Section 26 of the Indian Forest Act. The final decision had been taken depending on this act. Justice B.C.Basak informed:

‘So far as the land is concerned the admitted position is that the petitioners have no legal right to the said land in any capacity whatsoever.’

Justice Basak spent only two sentences regarding all the allegations of state oppression on the people of Marichjhapi, police violence, killings, plundering and the economic blockade.

‘So far as the question of use of force is concerned this is denied and disputed. Accordingly, I am not going into such disputed facts herein.’

His final verdict was,

‘I dismiss this application and vacate all interim orders.’

However, in the last paragraph of the verdict, Justice Bimal Chandra Basak wrote,

‘However, the position remains that these persons are really refugees. Their plight is unfortunate. They are the victims of incidents and decisions over which they had no control in the sense they have not become refugees out of their own choice. Accordingly I merely express my desire that in dealing with these persons, the Government will act with restraint, sympathy and charity.’

The very fact that the victims of the massacre were termed as 'refugees' in the final verdict of 'Marichjhapi Case 1979', opened up new possibilities for them to reestablish a new legal battle.

Laws Regarding the Refugee Crisis in India

In India, there is no law regarding the rights and the security of the refugees. Even the international announcements on the refugee rights are ignored and disputed in India. But, when there is a crisis, a few primitive laws are enforced upon the refugees which are contrary to their interest. Such as :

The Passport Entry in India Act, 1920 states that if anyone comes to India from abroad, they need to have a passport.

'The Foreigners Act, 1946' imposes certain restrictions upon a foreigner in India. The law was enacted by the British rulers following World War II to impose certain restrictions on the entry of foreigners into India. It is still the most powerful weapon in respect of the entry of foreigners into India, their presence therein and their departure therefrom.

The Passport Act, 1967 provides for the issue of passport and travel documents, to regulate the departure from India for the citizens of India and for other persons and for matters incidental and ancillary thereto.

The Registration of Foreigners Act 1939 provides for the registration of foreigners in British India. Still, in many places of independent India, despite having a visa or passport, foreigners are required to register themselves.

Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act, 1983 provides for the establishment of Tribunals for the determination, in the fair manner, of the question whether a person is an illegal migrant to enable the Central Government to expel illegal migrants from India. The most important information about this Act is that in 2005, the Act was struck down by a three-judge bench of the Supreme Court of India and all the tribunals functioning under this Act were declared unconstitutional and subsequently, closed down.

The Protection of Human Rights Act, 1993 confers human rights to the refugees by mentioning the international declaration in this regard. It states,

"'Human rights' means the rights relating to life, liberty, equality and dignity of the individual guaranteed by the Constitution or embodied in the International Covenants and enforceable by courts of India."

On the basis of this Act, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) was formed. At the state level, these committees are known as 'State Human Rights Commission'. The NHRC filed a few significant suits in the Supreme Court of India in order to protect the rights of the refugees.

The Rights of the Refugees as per the Verdict of the Indian Court

On several occasions the issue of refugee rights has come up in the Supreme Court of India. Practically speaking, the Supreme Court of India is the only place that can judge and protect the rights of the refugees. Following Act 21 of the Constitution of India, several debates on why there are refugees or the possibilities of conferring limited constitutional rights to a person who is not an Indian citizen, have taken place in the Supreme Court. Some of the significant legal battles regarding constitutional rights are - 'Anwar Case' in 1971, 'Louis De Raedt Case' in 1991, 'National Human Rights Commission Case' in 1996 and 'Chandrima Das Case' in 2000.

In 1996, in the final verdict of a legal battle between the National Human Rights Commission and the State of Arunachal Pradesh and Anr, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of India M.A.Ahmadi and Justice S.C.Sen ensured liberty and rights of the Chakma refugees. If we delve into the background of the Chakma refugees, we can find out that a large number of Chakmas, erstwhile living in East Pakistan, migrated to Assam and Tripura to take shelter since they lost land to the development of Kapai Dam on Karnaphuli river. Eventually they started taking Indian citizenship. Later on, almost 4012 Chakmas had settled in Arunachal Pradesh with the support of the government. But the Chakmas started complaining that attempts had been made to evict them from Arunachal Pradesh. On 9th September 1994, the People's Union for Civil Liberties, Delhi brought this issue to the attention of the NHRC. The commission issued letters to the Chief Secretary, Arunachal Pradesh and the Home Secretary, Government of India. In reply to this letter it was stated that the situation was totally under control and adequate protection had been given to the Chakmas. On 15th October 1994, the Committee for Citizenship Rights of the Chakmas (CCRC) filed a representation with the NHRC complaining of the prosecution of the Chakmas. The petition contained a

press report stating that the All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union (AAPSU) had raised 'quit notices to the alleged foreigners including the Chakmas', even forcefully if need be. In this regard, the NHRC also filed a writ petition in the Supreme Court against the central government as well as the government of Arunachal Pradesh. On the operational part, the court ordered,

- (1) ' The first respondent, the State of Arunachal Pradesh, shall ensure that the life and personal liberty of each and every Chakma residing within the State shall be protected and any attempt to forcibly evict or drive them out of the State organized groups, such as AAPSU, shall be repelled, if necessary by requisitioning the service of parliamentary of police force, and if additional forces are considered necessary to carry out this direction, the respondent will request the second respondent, the Union of India, to provide such additional force, and the second respondent shall provide such additional force as it necessary to protect the lives and liberty of the Chakmas;
- (2) Except in accordance with law, the Chakmas shall not be evicted from their homes and shall not be denied domestic life and comfort therein.'

One of the main aspects of this case was that the CCRC filed the complaint which the Supreme Court considered to be important and reliable. The Supreme Court's verdict clarified the following facts:

'We are a country governed by the Rule of law. Our constitution confers certain rights on every human being and certain other rights on citizens. Every person is entitled to equality before the law and equal protection of the laws. So also, no person can be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law. Thus the state is bound to protect the life and liberty of every human being, be he a citizen or otherwise....'

In 2005, in a legal battle between Sadananda Sanwal and the Government of India (Writ Petition (Civil) No. 131 of 2000), a three-judge bench consisted of Justice R.C.Lahoti, J.P.Mathur and P.K.Balasubramaniam delivered an important verdict whereby they struck down the Illegal Immigrants Act and all the tribunals functioning under this act were declared unconstitutional and subsequently, closed down. The case was regarding the legality of the eviction of Bangladeshi immigrants from the land of Assam. The first two stanzas of this verdict says,

‘(1) The provisions of the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act, 1983 and the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Rules, 1984 are declared to be ultra vires the Constitution of India and struck down;

(2) The Tribunals and the Appellate Tribunals constituted under the Illegal Migrant (Determination by Tribunals) Act, 1983 shall cease to function.’

This verdict did not support or protect the rights of the refugees in any sense. Still, invalidating the Illegal Migrants Act had a huge historical significance. On the other hand, there were more such laws which would curb the rights of the refugees and could be challenged as unconstitutional.

The Marichjhapi Case (1979) didn't go to the division bench of the Calcutta High Court or the Supreme Court. There was no preparation or condition for that as well. But the final verdict of the case leaves some important question marks.

Considering the final verdict of the legal battle between the National Human Rights Commission and the State of Arunachal Pradesh and Anr (1996), it can be noticed that the personal accounts of the Chakmas and their complaints made a huge impact on the decision. But in the case of Marichjhapi, Justice B.N.Basak, while giving his final verdict, had completely refuted and neglected the personal accounts and complaints of the victims of Marichjhapi. Rather, the sentence was entirely based on the allegations raised against the refugees by the government in their affidavit. It is simply an example of non-application of mind on the part of the Justice.

Justice B.N.Basak himself had ordered that lawyers of both sides should visit Marichjhapi for inspection. Accordingly, the lawyers went there and the appellants submitted their report in a supplementary petition. Despite that, in the final verdict there was no discussion of that report based on the inspection and its results. It is simply an example of non-application of mind on the part of the Justice.

In the main petition, violation of Article 21 was one of the major issues that were addressed. Article 21 secures the fundamental right to life and right to personal liberty. But in 1977, when the internal Emergency was lifted, the fundamental rights secured by Article 21 began to be interpreted in a more liberal manner at the Supreme Court of India. Still, Justice B.N.Basak, in his final verdict, never took

into consideration the right to life and right to personal liberty of the appellants or of the Marichjhapi victims. Rather, he refuted this matter as ‘disputable’. This is an example of ‘bad in law’. On the other hand, we notice that the accounts of massacre, sexual assault, oppression and torture are primarily provided by the victims, which in the presence of the accused turns out to be 'disputable'. The criminals never acknowledge their crime in the affidavit, rather they bluntly deny it.

The verdict was entirely based on a disinformation that Marichjhapi is a reserved governmental forestland. This was the main logic behind the decision. The fundamental rights to life and the right to personal liberty of the victims of Marichjhapi were completely neglected, refuted and denied.

As a consequence of the verdict delivered by Justice Basak which was mistake-ridden, mindless and bad in law, thousands of refugees lost their shelter, family, security and future; the state got the license to continue and support this inhuman oppression and this inglorious episode of eviction following the terrifying state violence against the helpless refugees left a long-lasting stain on the social, political and human history of the state of West Bengal.

Police Violence that I Witnessed

Sabita Goldar

[Sabita Goldar was a refugee woman who was evicted from Marichjhapi. The memory of those dark days still makes her burst out into tears.]

Q : Your name?

S.G : Sabita Goldar

Q : Do you have any relation with Rangalal Goldar?

S.G : I don't know. But, Shibu Goldar of Kalimela is my relative.

Q : Where did you live in Bangladesh?

S.G : In Bangladesh, I used to live in Barbere village which falls under Dakub police station. I came here in 1970. From Bangladesh, they took us to Baroda Camp and later on, we were brought here. I am not sure, but it has been 8 years since we settled down in this land. We could not bear with the torture anymore and

so, we moved to the Sunderbans. We stayed there for 13/14 months. We were forcefully evicted from the Sundarbans against our will.

Q : What kind of pressure?

S.G : We were subjected to a food blockade. Because we were staying in Marichjhapi, we were not able to secure food from Kumirmari which was on the other side. The infants used to cry of hunger. Nobody had any food in store. What should we do! There were coconut trees in Marichjhapi. We fed our children with coconut and boiled spinach mixed with salt. How many days could they starve like that? Then at night... They ventured out to secure supplies.

They could not cross the river. The food they had managed to gather was seized by the police. We were subjected to a blockade so that nobody could reach the other side of the river. We were unable to manage food. Adjacent to our house, Nirmal Dhali set up a school which consisted of 3 rooms. At about 10/11 at night, the school was set on fire. The children were beaten with sticks.

Q : Who set the houses on fire?

S.G : We are not sure if this was done by the police. Police were definitely there. They ignited the fire which consumed the surrounding houses. People were left clueless. They didn't know what to do with their kids. Then at night, police came and unleashed merciless lathi-charge at them. They forced them to get into the launches. While they were taken hastily to the launches, men and women with their little kids fell on the ground weeping. I had my mother-in-law and my husband with me. I took my 5 year old boy Tapas in my arms and came running to reach the shore. I left my little daughter at home. My mother-in-law managed to take a pillow pressed on her arms which I mistook as my daughter. But soon enough I realized that it was just a pillow. Then, my sister-in-law surreptitiously came and took out my daughter. While doing that, one side of her saree caught fire. For the rest of the night, we took shelter at the shore bearing with all the tortures we were inflicted upon. At dawn, we were beaten up again and were forced to ride a launch. We arrived at Hasnabad from where we were taken to Dandakaranya by a car.

Q : Have you experienced any incident of death?

S.G : Many such incidents. People were shot dead. I had managed to have a narrow escape as the bullet passed by my ear. I fell down on the ground. I saw 3 refugees

shot dead. I don't know the whereabouts of others. 3 families live here, at this place, among whom Dhali and my nephew are suffering from mental illness.

The extent of torture they inflicted on us is unexplainable. They even did not let us eat peacefully. When our girls used to go to the market, they were manhandled, teased and humiliated.

Q : Were you familiar with Sabita Dhali whom the police had taken to Bagna camp?

S.G : No, I don't know her.

Q : According to the police, nobody died in that encounter.

S.G : No. Many people died. They were thrown away from the launch, they were stampeded while rushing through the wooden board to get to the launch and so on. Who said that nobody died? I was a witness. How can they claim that nobody died? All of the refugees did not manage to get to the launch. I don't know what fate was awaiting them.

Q : The food blockade continued for 14/15 days....

S. G : Yes. For 3-4 days, all possible food supply was stopped from the other side. After that, people from the other side started to supply rice sacks through the passage of saltwater by tying it with a thick rope. We shared the rice among us at a ratio of 50-100 gms per person. That was absolutely insufficient to our needs. It used to take 4 days for the next supply of rice to come, that too at night, soaked with water. We had to pull the sack of rice with a rope to take it to our side. The situation remained unchanged. We used to share the rice. Some of us did not even get our share. This was the situation. Our life was full of misery and penury. At last, the oppression became so unbearable that we had to leave the place.

Interview : 25 September, 2009.

The Deadbodies Were Kept at the Edge of My Pond

Rabi Mondal

[Rabi Mondal is a landless farmer. The administration capitalized on the conflicts between the refugees and local people to carry out their plan of action. Police gave them 500 rupees each. On 31st January

1979, almost 40 refugees were shot dead by the police. The corpses were initially kept at the edge of the pond of Rabi Mondal's house.]

My name is Rabi Mondal. My house is in Kumirmari.

Q : What do you do for a living?

Rabi : I catch shrimps to feed my stomach, I work hard for a living.

Q : Do you own land?

R. M : No.

Q : During 78/79, there was a complete mayhem when the refugees settled in Marichjhapi. Would you like to tell us something about what you know or what you experienced back then?

R. M : The refugees went to our village. They stayed at my house and in the houses of the neighbors like Biswajit Mondal or Sambhu Gayen. They told us, "Kindly let us stay here. We are huge in number. We would stay and sleep in the veranda or in the courtyard." There were almost 5-6 thousands of them. More and more people kept coming to our village. They stayed there for 2-3 days and then crossing the river, they went on the other side. Many among them took away our dinghies or small boats for transportation. When we tried to stop them, they got excited. We could not say anything further, because they outnumbered us. Having gone on the other side, they cleaned the forest and started building their inhabitat. They used to come to our side by boat, went to the markets for shopping, and took away water from the pond. One day, 5 of us went to that side to see the situation over there. When we landed up there, they asked, "Do you have permission?" We replied, "What permission are you talking about?" They said, "You need permission to set foot here." We had to retreat. We were wondering how we would get to the other side. A woman was crossing the river by boat at that time. We sought help from her. She refused to help us by saying, "Bring your own boat and then cross the river. We will not help you in this matter." We snatched the boat from her and managed to come to our side. We kept the boat with us. When they were in need they took away our boats and dinghies. And now they are asking for permission! So, to ensure the safety of the Sundarbans and the localities around the Sunderbans, we suspended the ferry service. When the Forest Department got this news, the D.M or D.D.O (?) arrived at the launch and took away all 5 of us. After the primary introduction, he asked, "Who had prevented the ferries from crossing?" We replied, "Sir, we did this." He said, "Well done. The Sundarbans is

very close to your locality. You did the right thing.” I told him, “But sir, if they attack us with spears and choppers at night?” He assured us by saying, “No worries. We will provide a police force at your place for safety.” And he kept his words. He also enquired about our livelihood. We said, “We catch crabs and fish to eat.” He realized that we were needy people. So he gave us 500 rupees, noted down our names and said, “You have done a good job. This way, you can save the Sundarbans. It would be your loss if the Sundarbans is destroyed.” At night, we saw 10-12 launches on duty had already arrived. Section 144 was imposed in that place so that nobody from that side could cross the river and come to this side. This continued for the entire week. Then, the refugees started to come swimming across the river.

Q : So, you were offered 500 rupees each for putting a stop to ferrying across the river?

R.M : Yes sir, they offered us money because of that.

Following this, Section 144 was imposed and everything became quiet for a week. After that, the refugees started to throw spears and choppers from the other side of the river. Then, they desperately began swimming across from all three sides of the river to reach this side. Police chased them. From the Wednesday market, a force applied tear gas on them and made them succumb. Our houses went dark. D.M was sitting on our veranda. We told him, “Sir, our houses are also getting badly affected.” He assured us by saying, “Don't worry. As long as I am here, you are safe. We have our forces on all sides. We will not let you suffer loss.” In the meantime, a force of 10-15 men arrived from the Wednesday market. They charged tear gas from the other side. Firing had already begun in the market. The refugees took shelter in our houses. So, when the police opened fire, local people were also getting shot along with the refugees. The situation became so volatile that the police started to reconsider. When the police left, we saw dead bodies scattered everywhere. In my count, almost 30/35/40 people died. The bodies lay in a heap on the edge of my pond. Meni Munda was killed around 5 pm. The police targeted the refugees on the road. The refugees survived somehow. Instead, local people were killed. Meni Munda lost her life. Her son burst into tears. I was unable to step outside my house at that moment. It was utter chaos all around. The dead bodies were taken into the launch in sacks. Police instructed us not to step out of our

houses. Firing was still on. The corpses were being loaded at the launch. Along with the refugees there was Meni Munda, a local woman.

Q : After that, did the government give or offer any money to you for setting the refugee's houses on fire or for assisting them in this task?

R.M : No, they did not give us any money. They only gave us 500 rupees to stop the ferrying. When the officer asked about our intention, we said, "Sir, they demanded permit from us. We got so enraged at this that we took such revenge."

Q : What are the names of the rest 4 in your group?

R.M : Should I name all 5 of us?

Q : Yes, please.

R.M : You already know mine, I have noted it down. Other than me, there were Nirmal Munda, Hemanta Mondal, Khogen Barman and Tarak Mondal. We lived close to each other, in the same village. They still catch fish and shrimps.

Interview : April 07, 2007

Economy of Marichjhapi

Arabinda Mistry

[Arabinda Mistry was a refugee leader. He was joint secretary of "Udbastu Unnoyonshil Samiti", the secretary of Marichjhapi School and was in charge of the fishery in Marichjhapi.]

Q : Following migration, did you arrive in West Bengal first or did you go to Dandakaranya?

Arabinda Mistry : I came here in June, 1970. We stayed at Basirhat for a few days. We were provided with rice and dal to feed our stomach. I don't remember how long our stay lasted over there, maybe it was 1 month or so. Then, we were taken to Madhya Pradesh by train. At first, we were put in tents at a place called Kendi. It was an open ground. In the meantime, the liberation war began in Bangladesh. More and more people started coming in. They were also shelterless like us. If we

were 'refugees', they were 'saranarthis'. They were placed in these tents while we were relocated in Bardavata camps that were adjacent to Mana camp.

Q : How was the ambiance in Mana camp?

A.M : How should I put it in words! The environment was not suitable for the Bengalis. There was no soil, only rocks. On top of that, the military administration imposed tremendous pressure on us. This kind of atmosphere cannot be found anywhere in India. This is the reality. Eventually, I got a job to work with the refugees.

Q : What did you do?

A.M : The job was of a camp assistant. In other words, I was a 'Sevak' according to the refugees. I am saying this because....

Q : How much salary did you get? What kind of work were you assigned to?

A.M : LDC Ground. I had to look after and cater to all the needs of the refugees. I had to take care of certain things like, if the refugees are getting rations properly, if they are having proper food, if the kids are going to school, if there are any casualties and so on. I used to get the salary of an LDC. We were third class staff. At that time, we had to issue a certificate in the name of an evacuee. One day, Colonel S.P.Nandy wrote a certificate and asked me to complete it. I said in reply that as a camp assistant, I've listed those things which I myself had distributed. From there, I went to the head of the department of Mana group of transit. He said, "This hasn't been done properly. You need to finish this up." I said, "But sir, you haven't given me those things. If I had them, I would surely have done what you are saying." At this, he said, "But Mr. Nandy had told you to do so." I still refused. So, he took me to Nandy. Nandy ordered, "When I am saying you have to do this, there is no alternative." My elder brother, having migrated in 1964, used to work for Nandy. His name was Jyotish. He called me one day to say, "If you want to survive, write whatever they are asking you to write. Or else, you will be camped out." Do you know what "camp out" means?

Q: No.

A.M : It is a deadly weapon. Without any prior notice you will be carried to any random place in a lorry and would be disposed of. They would show no reason for

it. But you would be evicted along with your family. I was extremely afraid of this. So, I signed. When the evacuees went away, a panel was made to send us to other places. The panel consisted of almost 57 people. I was in 3rd place. When the recruitment notice came, there was no number 3 in the list. Since I had been involved in a fight with Nandy, I did not get the job. I accepted my fate. Then in 1973, I engaged myself in a business. I used to bring chili from Orissa and sell them in Mana and Rangpur districts. One day, I heard the name of 'Udabastu Unnoyonshil Samiti' in a mic announcement. I didn't know about this organization at all. I got a leaflet which did not contain any particulars about the organization. Only the address of Mana camp was stated there. There was no mention of the name of the secretary or the president. I could not understand the matter. Next day, I went to Mana camp and got to know a few things about them. However, I did not progress further after that. I continued to mind my own business. But, later I slowly involved myself in this when a committee started forming. There I met Mr. Rangalal Goldar. Previously, he was my respected teacher in Bangladesh. He said, "Look, I have formed a committee for the refugees." I replied, "I hope it won't turn out to be a gimmick. In Mana camp, there was already a tussle going on between the Employee's Union and the government. It won't be like that, right?" Goldar said in reply, "We want to start a movement with the refugees." I said, "Sir, If you can really make this happen, I will always be by your side. Otherwise, I won't involve myself in this." He took me to the camp and introduced me to the other members. Suddenly one night, Raiharan Babu and Anil Babu, a government employee, took me to the field for discussion. We talked for 2-3 hours. He said, "The 'Udbastu Unnoyonshil Samiti' has been formed to destroy the 'Employees' Union'. So, you should not work with them." I agreed with him. Raiharan Babu mainly helped us with his intelligence from time to time. He thought that if he could capture the samiti, he would get Satish Babu on his side. Satish Babu had a huge man power. He was influential and honest. Most importantly, he always spoke the truth. The 'samiti' was formed. I got associated with it. The movement was anti-central government in nature. We demanded for a stable rehabilitation where there would be an industry. During that time, in Dandakaranya, Bengalis were being annihilated brutally. This was possible because they kept us scattered in different places. If we could build up an unified existence, then we wouldn't have met with such violence. Satish Babu might have told you that we would not die like this. The perpetrators of this annihilation were spared from punishment as

well. If we went to the court, the judge used to say, “Look, they are an uneducated Bengali community. They have no fault of their own. If a cow kills a man with its horn, the cow would not be at fault. These people are like cows and thus they are guilt-free.” We had to deal with such injustice. We demanded, “Provide all the Bengalis with a proper rehabilitation in one place. Be it under the sea or be it at the top of the hill, all the Bengalis should be rehabilitated in one place.” When it didn't happen, we started our protest movement. We raised the slogan “Bengalis should be rehabilitated in Bengal.”

In the meantime, we communicated with certain leaders and came to West Bengal. I don't remember the exact date of our arrival. Among the leaders, George Fernandez and Jambuban Rao Dhote played a significant role in our mission. We decided that a contingent of people from all the groups would go to Delhi. But, Emergency was declared just 1-2 days before our scheduled mission. We lost our track. Being utterly clueless, I escaped from there. Raiharan Babu also did the same thing. Satish Babu got arrested and was detained for 3 years in jail. In 1977, when the Janta government came into power, we were reunited again and started taking the movement forward.

A gentleman named Rabishankar Pandey told me something which motivated us deeply, ‘You can go to other pilgrimages many times, but Gangasagar only once.’ Since the river Ganges flows through the heart of Bengal, we thought that we would be rescued if we could get there. So, we arrived here and continued our movement. In the meantime, Samar Babu and Prankrishna Babu.....

Q : Did you carry out a hunger strike before starting the movement?

A.M. : Yes.

Q : Tell me more about the hunger strike and subsequent police atrocities.

A.M. : Relay hunger strike went on for a month. There were countless people who participated in that hunger strike. Satish Babu was there, so was I. This was going on in 4 camps - Mana, Manavata, Bardavata and Kurud. But when we realized that the protest was not bearing any fruit, we decided to fast till death. Satish Babu was definitely there. I don't remember the names of others. Subsequently, an agreement was made stating that the representatives of the refugees would be taken to the sites

for looking at the living conditions in those places where they were proposed to be rehabilitated. If they find it satisfactory, only then the rehabilitation would take place. A promise or a written.....

Q: The agreement was made between which two sides?

A.M. : Between the central government and 'Udbastu Unnoyonshil Samiti'. At that time, Congress was the ruling party. The Morarji Government was yet to come. On part of the central government, the rehabilitation minister signed the agreement. I don't remember his name. The matter of the agreement goes like this:

1. The representatives of the refugees will be taken to the sites where they are supposed to be rehabilitated. If they find that place suitable for living, only then the rehabilitation will take place.
2. The dole provided by the government to the refugees previously was very insufficient. Now, each family was allotted 10 rupees per month. The amount was not bad. So, we lifted our hunger strike and agreed to the terms. After that, when they started the rehabilitation process, they didn't care for our consent. They just sent us to random places whimsically. So, we rose up in protest to put a halt to this rehabilitation process. We decided that nobody would leave Mana camp for rehabilitation. Meanwhile, Emergency was declared. Everything came to a standstill.

Q: We heard that you were suppressed with guns?

A.M. : Yes, that happened even before.

Q : Tell me a little more about that episode.

A.M. : Previously when the bullets were fired, I was not present there. After 1970, during my stay over there, another event of firing happened. But, in that incident, the 'saranarthis' were shot, and not the 'refugees'.

Following this episode, our movement became widely known in all parts of the country. Political leaders started coming in on the scene. Rabishankar Pandey and Jambuban Rao Dhote were the first to arrive. They were followed by other leaders from West Bengal.

Ram Chatterjee and Samar Mukherjee arrived later. When we were demanding for our rehabilitation in West Bengal, Samar Mukherjee arrived after that. Meanwhile,

I had heard that they had a discussion with Jyoti Basu in Villai. Since I was not present there, I don't know anything about that.

When we held a meeting with Samar Mukherjee for the first time, we demanded for our rehabilitation in the Sunderbans. Samar Babu told us, “Sundarban is located in West Bengal and You are the people of West Bengal.” He added, “I cannot tell you for sure if the government will allow you to stay in the Sunderbans. If you can claim the land by forming a movement, you should definitely go ahead. There are many colonies in West Bengal which are forcefully captured by the refugees. They have struggled a lot to grab those places. If you can win your place by continuous struggle, you might as well be successful. Otherwise, the government might not allow you to stay there.” So, he neither said a yes, nor a no. Prankrishna, too, used to say exactly the same thing. I do not distinctly remember his words, but once he said something like this, “Run your organization under the leadership of UCRC.” We said in reply, “We don’t have any knowledge about UCRC. We don’t have any prior experience of working with them. We have heard that your organization is a wing of a particular political party. We don't want any political affiliation. We can't work that way, be it UCRC or something else. We will operate as an apolitical organization.”

Q: Why did you take this decision?

A.M. : We didn't want to be involved with any political party. Actually, we tried to keep politics out of our activities. Raiharan Babu and Goldar Babu were there with me. We haven't come to West Bengal yet. We had a talk with Prankrishna Babu. He said, “I don't know how you will occupy that place in the Sunderbans. Would you try to usurp the locality? That will involve a lot of risk. The government will not allow you to do that! I don't know how much power you possess. My suggestion will be to form a movement outside Bengal where our organization is pretty much active. We will provide you with all sorts of assistance under the leadership of UCRC.” We did not agree to his proposal. We were figuring out how to reach West Bengal and in which fashion we would choke out our plan of action.

Simultaneously, our movement was gaining its momentum amidst the refugees in West Bengal. We were getting a huge response from them. At that point, someone offered us a good number of rail tickets to go to West Bengal. It was very surprising for all of us. We couldn’t figure out who was giving the tickets and for what reason.

This might be a signal for us to leave the place we had been staying.

It was a ploy to drive us away. How did we get to know that? We had a lot of legal cases there. Advocate Mr. Chowhan used to be a part of Jansangh. He said, “Listen, I am making arrangements for all of you to shift from this place. You can go in any which way possible.” I think Chowhan took the initiative to buy tickets for us.

Q: How did you plan to earn a livelihood when you would settle in Marichjhapi?

A.M : Before coming to Marichjhapi we did 3 surveys. I cannot give you scientific facts, but I can tell from real-life experience. From our ancestors we had learned that the alluvial soil was capable of growing rich crops. But we did not find any big trees at that place. The place was full of mangrove trees. We planned to do prawn fishery in the huge water bodies and export them to foreign markets. We discussed this with the West Bengal government as well. So, apart from our survival, we were determined to earn foreign money. The land could be used for agriculture. During my stay at Marichjhapi I saw my mother planting a gourd seed at the root of a tamarisk tree. I experimented with 3-4 seeds like this and it worked well. I brought stubbles from Kumirmari and spread them on the soil. The plants bore such beautiful gourds that it was even photographed by Yugantar. There was a fosse adjacent to my land where I planted paddy taken from Kumirmari. It was like a marshland we generally get from digging the soil while building a room. The paddy that grew in that space was excellent in quality. So, I proved the fact that the soil is fit for agriculture as well.

Q: Why did the government try to forcefully evict you all from that place when you tried so desperately to survive?

A.M : It is very difficult to answer your question. I am not sure why the government tried to evict us from the land. We are neglected. None wanted us to survive. None wanted us to live unitedly. This might be a reason. On top of that, politically we were very inexperienced. Congress thought that we might possibly organize ourselves under the banner of CPIM. On the other hand, CPIM thought that our purpose might drive us to join hands with the Congress.

They never wanted us to unite ourselves under the banner of the ruling party. My firm belief is that they never wanted us, the deprived multitude, to live unitedly. When we tried to organize ourselves in Dandakaranya, we were purposefully shattered by them. If they'd allowed us to live collectively, we would have shown them what we were capable of doing. During our stay over there, we produced salt from the soil and sold them in the market. The soil of Marichjhapi was very salty. We brought the soil, watered it and boiled the water. The salt we produced was even better than Tata salt. We sold salt at Mollakhali market. They accused us of destroying the forestland. What forest are they talking about? Do you consider a land full of mangrove trees a forest? The forest had already been destroyed long before. When we built the embankment, there were large trees who were 10-20 feet in height. There was no chance of a forest being formed there. Forest resources were already exhausted. There were some large trees in the higher lands. But that too was scarce. How could you find a large tree in such low land? The forest ceased to exist there and it happened very naturally. Now, they accuse us of destroying forest resources for our survival or cutting down Goran trees and firewood for selling them in the market. They keep highlighting this fact to bring allegations against us. We did this solely to feed our stomach. Until and unless we were provided with alternative resources, we built up 5 embankments and ran them in a cooperative system. Huge number of fishes used to gather there as they came from the sea in their due course.

Q: Tell us something about the role of Ram Chatterjee.

A.M : Ram Chatterjee visited us for discussion quite a number of times. At that time, we accepted the fact that the government of West Bengal would not sit for any discussion with us. When Ram Chatterjee came for the third time, I was staying alone in a certain place. I was solely instrumental in building up those embankments, starting from planning to execution. So, I was given all the responsibilities regarding the embankments. I don't know if you would believe my words or not, but the place was amidst a forest which was a regular haunt of tigers. I was not afraid of tigers back then, although now I am pretty much scared of them. I was sitting in a place where a tiger had passed by just a while back. The water was still muddy and there were paw marks on the embankment suggesting the trace of the animal. I still wonder how I managed to keep sitting there. Suddenly, I heard the voice of Ram Chatterjee, saying, "Hey, get up." I had no one with me. I was

wearing a lungi and a punjabi. A towel was tied around my waist. I was looking after the embankment. So, I said, "In this attire?" He replied, "That doesn't really matter." I said, "But at least I should send a message to my home. If I don't return, they will think that a tiger has killed me." Ram took me to a launch. From Hasnabad, we came to the Writer's building by car. I was alone. We needed Jyoti Basu for discussion. So, I said, "Sir, we can sit for a talk. But kindly do not send the refugees to Dandakaranya. Once we discuss it, only then you can take the matter forward." I told Jyoti Babu, "We are ready to sit for a discussion. You direct us accordingly." After hearing me out, he replied, "Alright. We will inform you about this." Then, Ram Chatterjee said to me, "Let's go then." He took me to Hasnabad by car and arranged a boat for sending me back to Marichjhapi. Meanwhile, a rumor spread that Mistry was missing. Everyone knew that I went to the forest. When I reached home at 12 at night, my wife asked, "Where did you go?" At that point, I started getting a bit nervous. I went there without the committee's permission. I didn't know what charge would be brought against me! When asked, I said, "I had told Jyoti Babu to stop the process of sending people to Dandakaranya until there is a proper discussion between us. If he agrees to sit with us, we will discuss the matter with him." But nothing like that happened in the following days. In the meantime, when I was coming to Hasnabad by car, it was broadcast on the village radio that the refugees would be sent to Dandakaranya that night. So, there was no scope for any kind of further discussion. We were subjected to economic blockade. Boys, who went outside for work, had been arrested and never came back. It was not possible for us to carry on with the fight. Police had taken charge of the place. People could not come from outside to provide us with monetary help. No boat was allowed to enter our island since there was a blockade. Some of us agreed to go back to Dandakaranya. We took help from a person from Mollakhali and sent Rangalal, Goldar Babu and Satish Babu to Dandakaranya. We said, "You won't be arrested. Go wherever you want." The endless ritual of torture started with demolishing the houses. We were brutally beaten up. Women had to bear with inexplicable forms of tortures. During that time, Satish Babu and Goldar Babu were present in Marichjhapi. But, as the extent of torture surpassed all limits, we sent them back. Our houses were set ablaze. Police, accompanied by some young men, set Jatin Mondal's house on fire. We did not recognise the common people involved in the action. When Jatin's house was consumed by fire, we told Satish Babu, "You should move as soon as possible. It doesn't really matter if we

get arrested. But if you get arrested, the movement will suffer. You need to organise the movement from within.” When they had gone, only Raiharan Babu and I were left. Raiharan Babu said, “We, too, need to go.” I said in reply, “Raiharan Babu, a person of your age should not be involved in further risk. You should leave. I will stay here. Do you want to know why I won't leave? I need to show them what I have stored for them this far.” I took a torn net and showed it to him, “They should see what I am leaving behind for them. These 5 embankments are like the palm of my hand.” When I threw a net on one of them, plenty of shrimps came up. I said, “Do you want to see more of it? Let's go.” From the next embankment, I netted barramundi fish. I added, “Looking beneath the surface of the water, you will find an abundance of parshe fish. So, where would I go leaving all of this behind? You should go and save the movement. If Arabinda Mistry dies, it will not affect the movement at all. What I have been able to secure for all of us over this period of time, none else could do that. I have found a way to earn a livelihood by farming. So, I just can't leave it like this and go.” He had already arranged for a boat for his journey. I don't know where he went after that.

Q: After coming back, did you go to Dandakaranya again?

A.M.: No, I didn't.

Q: Weren't you eager to know how people had been doing in Dandakaranya?

A.M : Even if I was worried, I was left with no other option. I feel very bad for them. The refugees came here from East Bengal and were relocated to Dandakaranya. Then, driven by the hope of a better future, they came to Bengal. They had faith in us and in our words. But, they were again evicted from here and were sent back to Dandakaranya. So many people have lost in the crowd of largely populated West Bengal. I was like a son to the leaders. Raiharan Babu and Ranggalal Babu have passed away. If I could get a chance to see them once more when they were alive, they would have been very happy. But, I never went back to Dandakaranya. I tried to contact Satish Babu several times but he answered in the negative. So, I could not do much after that.

Q: What do you do now? Which occupation have you been in after coming here?

A.M : I work as a pushcart driver. I have been running a pushcart for a long time in the streets of Kolkata. My children were very young at that time. I could not afford

their studies. So, I involved them in this job as well. I neither could manage to do my work, nor could I see them suffer. I asked them to bring coal dust in a sack for me. While returning from the day's hard work, they would keep the sack full of coal dust on the platform. I would pick it up and sell it in the neighborhood on a bicycle. Although that didn't ensure our both ends meet, at least we could feed our stomach once a day with the money. Now, I have managed to set up a coal dust shop. Our situation has gotten better and we need not worry about securing our daily essentials. The four boys and two girls have grown up. They all got married and live separately. Only the youngest boy stays with me. I need his support. The eldest one works as a decoration craftsman. The middle boy works as a van driver. The other one is quite solvent - he lives in Rajasthan.

Dandakaranya, Marichjhapi and Our School

Nirmalendu Dhali

[Original name - Nirmal Kanti Dhali. Satish Mondal used to call him as Nirmalendu Dhali in Marichjhapi. He was the headmaster of 'Netaji Nagar Vidyapith' in Marichjhapi.]

I was a student of class 9 back then. One day, my father came from Khulna and said, "We won't be able to stay in this country anymore." I asked him, "Why baba? Where will we go from here?" He said, "The possibility of hindu-muslim communal riot is looming large. Muslims will not let us live here. The government is also provoking them. We, Hindus, will not be allowed to stay here. We must leave. If we stay here, they will kill us." Within a week, my father got in touch with a muslim agent and left his ancestral home with us. In our family, there were my father, mother, grandmother, I and my sister. We left everything behind, rode a boat and set out for our journey. After traveling a long distance through the river, we got down. My grandmother's age was above 80. She could not walk at all. Still, we walked almost 15/16 miles to reach the agent's house. He used to go for work in our locality. My father had a lot of faith in him. So, he gave everything, even the last penny to him out of trust. The agent helped us cross the river and come to this side, but he didn't give us our money back. So, having arrived here, my penniless and helpless father spent a few months in Hatkhola along with us. My mother had some money which helped us sustain for a few days. Then my father, having stood

in an endless queue day in and day out, managed to enlist our names in the government register. During that time, we had to survive on flattened rice, jaggery and bread. The suffering was endless. It went on for more than a month. Then we were sent to Mana camp. They left us at Raipur station by train. From there, we were carried to an empty maidan in a lorry. There were small tents in the maidan. Each tent had the capacity to accommodate a maximum of one person. But each tent was allocated for an entire family irrespective of the number of its members. There was no water supply, no proper sewage system and no trace of green in that arid desert. The area looked absolutely desolate. We were allotted a grant of 8-78 rupees for each family which was given every 10 days. Since there was no water available, all through day and night each of us used to stand in a long queue to secure water. Sometimes, a lorry used to carry water from Mana camp for us. All of us didn't get a chance to secure water, only some could. So, due to lack of water, food and medicine, within a few days a plague smote the area. Everyday, hundreds of deaths started being reported. The corpses were stuffed in a lorry and were carried to Baradar maidan. Then, the bodies were gathered in a heap, wood planks were placed over them and the heap was set on fire. The fire would spread at unequal proportions on the corpses leaving some of them untouched. Wild animals would feast on the unburnt corpses. There were 5 camps under Mana - Mana, Manavata, Bardavata, Kurud and Nowgong. Everyday from each of those camps dead bodies were carried and dumped into the maidan. In the evening, roll calls used to take place. The main member of each family was bound to be present in the meeting. If not present, the dole allotted for him would get cancelled. Sensors used to take place once a week where every family member had to be present. Otherwise, the dole would get cancelled. For these rules, none could go outside of the camp to earn a living. Day after day, the immense suffering caused by lack of money and lack of food reduced our bodies to mere skeletons. Countless deaths were reported. Some managed to escape. The children had no scope for study.

While coming from East Pakistan, I didn't manage to get my school certificate with me. So, I was not allowed to be admitted to Mana High School. In 1971, the central camp was dismantled and we were taken to Bardavata camp. My mother and my grandmother could not bear this inhuman destitution for long as both of them died in the gap of 15 days. Only I, my father and my sister survived. In 1971, I passed the test examination and got admitted to Mana High School.

In 1974, as the refugee movement began, 'Udbastu Unnoyonshil Samiti' was established at the leadership of Bimal Chakraborty and Dhiren Deb. Later on, Santosh Mondal, Rangalal Goldar, Raiharan Barei and Rabin Chakraborty joined the committee. People who were rehabilitated before 1970, were undergoing tremendous hardships. Being forced to live in the infertile lands, they could not harvest any crops even after toiling hard day in day out. They were completely dependent on rainwater. But rainfall was very irregular in that region.

Consequently, a protest movement broke out at Mana demanding a proper rehabilitation. People from various rehabilitation centers such as Maharashtra's Chandrapur, Karnataka's Sindhanur, Madhya Pradesh's Betul and Parulkot, Andhra Pradesh's Kagaznagar, Orissa's Umerkote and Malkangiri joined the movement. The leaders of the committee went to various camps to conduct meetings. From all these camps, people belonging to every age group came forward to hold a rally and to show their protest in front of the Chief Commanding Officer of Mana camp. They shouted slogans like, "Who are we? Refugees", "All refugees are brothers, We want rehabilitation in Bengal", "Our demands need to be fulfilled, We want proper rehabilitation in Bengal". During this time, many families were camped out showing false charges. Now, they are considered to be infiltrators.

Within a few days, the movement gained momentum. Hunger strikes began to take place at every camp. Consequently, Section 144 was enforced. At first, at Kurud camp, gunshots were unleashed against the refugees. Many people were injured, some of them died. Following this, at Manavata camp, the refugees were subjected to ruthless firing. After the incident, this camp was renamed as Shahid (Martyr) Vata. Still, the movement could not be suppressed. Rather, it became stronger and more powerful. After a month, the protesters began fasting unto death. Satish Babu himself started fasting unto death and one person from each camp joined him. They set their stage in front of the office of the Chief Commanding Officer. Everyday, we refugees used to hold a rally up to that stage and shouted out slogans to show our protest. The hunger strike continued for 7 days, but in the meantime, leaders from the ruling party would come to us and make fake promises so that we would withdraw our strike. We remained very alert to the fact that these manipulations should not affect our movement. At last, when the physical condition of the hunger

strikers was getting worse, big leaders from Delhi came here and by making fake promises they were able to put an end to the strike.

At that time, I was a student of class 11. My sister already got married. Only my father and I were left in the family. My father used to work at a ration shop and get a salary of 25 rupees per month. His age was around 70 back then. Our garments were supplied by the government - kurtas for men, half pants or loose khaki pants for the children, dhotis for the elderly and sarees for women. The quality of those clothes were so cheap that they would become thinner than even a mosquito net after one wash. Clothes are usually meant for covering shame, but these types of garments were not even worthy of wearing for a human being. Mothers and sisters had to fold the sarees in such a way that they would wrap their bodies thrice with those pieces of cloth. When we would go to school wearing those khaki half pants and kurtas, the children of the government employees would make fun of us by calling us 'bhai da'. We had to tolerate their constant ridicule. In our homes, there was no arrangement of light for studying. After 10 o'clock at night, when the locality became quiet, we used to sit under the lamp posts with books. My father could not afford my expenses. At about 3 AM everyday, each family used to wake up from their sleep, made chapatis with their own hand and started their journey to Raipur by foot to work as laborers in the factories or at anyone's home. After toiling hard for 8 hours, we would get only 2 rupees. With that little money, we had to survive for the entire week. Having cooked in the morning, I used to go to school after finishing my meal and leaving some food for my father. Studying under such difficulties, I passed the Higher Secondary exam in 1974 with second division.

On the other hand, our movement was at its peak during that time. Government administration had become desperate. They were trying to find ways to disrupt our movement as they constantly put pressure on us to go back to the rehabilitation centers. But we remained strict to our demand that we wanted rehabilitation only in Bengal and nowhere else. Towards the end of 1975, Brigadier Das replaced S.P.Nandy as the Chief Commanding Officer. As soon as Mr. Das assumed his duty, he stopped the service of doles and began sending people to rehabilitation centers. Those who did not agree to this and escaped from the camp were

considered to be infiltrators. In this way, within 1974-76 all the families were sent to rehabilitation centers from the camp.

Along with all the other families, my family was also taken to Orissa's Malkangiri zone. The refugees of Manavata camp were dumped into the lorries like cattles. The journey was a horrific experience for us as the infants and the elderlies could not resist but vomit, urinate and defecate inside the lorry and so the car would turn into a living hell. This was accompanied by their deadly screams out of sheer helplessness. Only a witness can actually feel this inexplicable suffering. After journeying for 2 days and 2 nights, we arrived at Malgieri where we were kept in a temporary camp called Pandripani. There were some open rooms in the midst of the jungle. The poles of those rooms did not have any roof over their heads. There were no doors or windows as well. Our group consisted of 3 families. Everyone was dying out of sheer hunger and thirst. In the evening, we were provided with khichuri to fill our stomach. All of us survived on that meager food for 2 more days. Then one day some government employees arrived in a jeep car and said to us, "You need to go to labor camps tomorrow." Subsequently, a lorry came the next day, took us inside and left us in the midst of a dense forest. There was a little patch of land in that forest where the trees were cut down from 2-3 feet above the ground. The area was filled with twigs and tendrils. Some freight lorries were standing there whose bodies were covered with tarpaulin. We were instructed to stay there. The place was allocated as our labor camp and we were ordered to work following the government's instructions. We requested them by saying, "Sir, how will we stay here? Is it really possible to survive like this amidst this dense forest?" They said in reply, "You will have to stay here and work according to the instructions." We all said in unison, "We have no problem doing hard work. But, kindly take us to a locality from this forest. We are ready to do whatever you will ask for. Please save us." The reply to this was, "You will have to stay here. There is no other alternative." Then they left. At night, we were all sitting curled up together in one place. There was a hill nearby. We'd never heard the growling of bears and other wild animals before. The children were so frightened that they started crying holding onto their parents. We lit a fire and sat around it. As the night deepened, the wild animals started advancing closer to our shelter. We lit more and more fires around us and screamed at our loudest. Around midnight, a little girl was attacked by a snake. As the girl shouted, her father noticed a cobra,

almost 4-5 feet in height, slithering away from the tent. The man was from the Sundarbans located in South Khulna. He had a lot of courage. As he saw the snake gliding out of the tent, he grappled it with a sack. He quickly put it in a pitcher and put a net across its opening. Hearing the girl's cry, we all ran towards the spot. We saw the snake inside the pitcher was fuming with rage. We asked the father how to save the girl. A man was standing next to us. He said, "Let me see the matter." Then he started casting his charms and incantations on the girl. The wound was still bleeding continuously. He treated the girl for the rest of the night. Next morning, we took the girl to a doctor's clinic on a bicycle. Our next task was to clean the forest and make the place inhabitable. After some days, some people came on behalf of the government and provided us with shovels and gads to dig a pond. From then on, digging the pond was a part of our daily routine. At night we would guard our locality. We were kept in the camp for almost a year. We dug 2 ponds within that span of time. From there, we were taken to another labor camp. The living conditions were very similar over there. Amidst the jungle, tarpaulin sheets were spreaded. Having gone there, we cleaned the forest and started staying. When a certain section of the forest was cleaned up by us, in 1977, our families were rehabilitated in that area. We were provided with a pair of bullocks, some paddy seeds and fertilizers. We cultivated a small patch of land with that but it bore no fruit. Meanwhile, the rehabilitation movement at Mana was getting more and more intense.

On behalf of 'Udbastu Unnoyonshil Samiti', Satish Babu kept in touch with all the rehabilitation centers through exchanging letters. In the meantime, the Left Front had won the election in West Bengal and formed their government. 'Udbastu Unnoyonshil Samiti' was in constant contact with the government. On January 1978, the Minister of State Home Department of West Bengal and Ashok Ghosh, the general secretary of West Bengal Forward Block visited various rehabilitation centers outside Bengal, such as, Maharashtra's Chandrapur, Madhya Pradesh's Parulkot, Andhra Pradesh's Kagaznagar, Orissa's Umerkote and Malkangiri and gave their speech stating, "We saw with our own eyes how the Congress government have sent you in exile in the name of rehabilitation. It is absolutely unbearable for us to witness the extent of suffering you have been undergoing. Going back, we will definitely discuss your condition with Jyoti Basu, the Chief

Minister of West Bengal. You need not worry. We will arrange for your rehabilitation in the Sunderbans as early as possible.”

Ashok Babu said, “From what we had experienced here, we understood that Congress has betrayed your faith. If you go to West Bengal, 5 crore people over there will welcome you with open arms. You should not lose heart at this moment. Your day will come. As soon as you receive our call, all of you will come to West Bengal.”

From February 1978, preparations started for shifting to the Sundarbans. Along with Dandakaranya, all the other rehabilitation centers received a letter stating the news, “Now we should start our journey to the Sundarbans in whichever way possible.” Now, regardless of everything, the refugees started moving towards the Sunderbans. After the departure of a number of refugees, the administration suddenly became very active. They stopped the cars from carrying the refugees. Left with no option, people walked on foot to cross the Orissa border and reach Andhra Pradesh. And then, from Madhya Pradesh they boarded a train to travel to West Bengal. Meanwhile, they were stopped at different rail stations by the police and were taken out of the trains. At the rail stations, the refugees started showing their protest. Traveling through a different route, many families had already reached Basirhat and Hasnabad, located in the North 24 Parganas in West Bengal. When I reached Hasnabad, I saw the area from Basirhat to Hasnabad was overflowing with refugees on both sides of the road and even in the fields. Everywhere I looked, I could see the coverings made of polythene papers. Within a few days, the area reached its full capacity. Now, there was not an inch of place available. The refugees had no place to even stand on their feet. According to the committee's instructions, everyone had arrived in West Bengal.

Satish Basu and the other members of the committee decided over a discussion that under these circumstances we needed to consult with Rambabu for his advice regarding our future activities. When Ram Babu was intimated, he came to Hasnabad and sat for a discussion with the members of the committee. He said, “We cannot take you to the Sundarbans directly. So, you make your own arrangements to go to the Sundarbans. We are definitely with you but we will help you passively.” Ram Babu went away making such promises. On the other hand,

the ferry service on Ichamati river was suspended. They didn't allow any refugees to ride on those launches. Now the problem was how to reach Sundarban? It was decided that the boats will be forcefully taken hold of. But how to get to the other side? Some young men took the courage to swim across the river and to get hold of a few boats with all their might. While swimming across Ichamati river, some of them lost track and were floated away into the big river. Some were never found again. From then on, people started going across the river day and night on those ferries. On the other side of the river, the fields were barren. They made coverings with polythene papers and started staying over there. In a few days, the soil of Hasnabad flooded with the refugees. Few of the families had already reached Kumirmari, the other side of the Sundarbans, by then. When 3-4 thousand families reached Kumirmari, they started moving towards Marichjhapi. But they faced problems while crossing the river. Local people were contacted. The locals were familiar to them. They were either friends or relatives of the refugees. They arranged for a few ferries to help the refugees cross the river. On the other hand, people were also going to Marichjhapi via Canning. Within a few days, thousands of families gathered at Marichjhapi. Now, they started facing a food and water crisis. The water of the river was extremely salty. So, they had to cross the river and secure drinking water from a pond at Kumirmari. As the days progressed, the people of Kumirmari got scared of the fact that if this continued for long the pond would dry out and all the fish would die. Consequently, the refugees had to travel more distance to secure water from another pond.

For collecting food, those of us who had a little money, used to visit a flea market at Mollakhali to buy broken bits of grains, atta, rice and other daily essentials. The committee called for an emergency meeting. All the committee members like Satish Babu, Rabin Babu, Rangalal Babu, Raiharan Babu, Arabinda Babu and other young members who were present at Marichjhapi attended the meeting.

The main topics of discussion in that meeting were - living arrangements, water service, health, education, law and order and construction of a dam. Since river water flooded the area during high tide, the construction of a dam was given the utmost priority. Without the dam, the area will remain unfit for living.

Following that, they discussed how to construct their homes. They divided the area into 5 sectors. One person was given the charge of each sector. It was decided that after maintaining the space for the road, shanties will be set up one after the other. Some members of the committee were given the charge of looking after food and water supplies. Debabrata Biswas, Barish Goldar and Raiharan Babu were among them who took up this responsibility.

Satish Babu himself took up the duty of dam construction. Samir Samaddar was to look after the health system and I was in charge of education. All the responsibilities were given to those people who had prior knowledge and experience in those sectors. So, everyone took up their job seriously and a healthy competition grew up among each of them. Radhikaranjan Biswas was in charge of campaigning. Two thousand people set out for the construction of a dam. Things started moving very fast. Starting from digging canals to setting up embankments everything was happening very rapidly. Almost 50 people were toiling day and night to manufacture spades, axes, choppers, paddles etc. It was mandatory that from each family at least one member should go to the dam construction site. But, from some families, even 2-3 members took up this work. The building of the dam was completed within a few days. There were no jungle or big trees at Marichjhapi. It was mainly a mangrove forest. The forest was cleaned up and the woods were carried to the adjacent island for selling. With the money they used to collect food. Other than that, people used to work in their locality or even in Kolkata to earn their livelihood.

As I was given the charge to look after education, I primarily built some shanties and started a school. At first, there were 5 teachers. Within a month, the number of students reached 2-3 thousand. Along with me, Nirmalendu Dhali, Rabindranath Mondal, Kanika Biswas, Amit Kumar Mondal, Snehata Mallik and Parul Dey took the responsibility of teaching the students. Gradually as the number of students increased, we recruited more teachers. Their names were - Gitarani Moitra, Sukumar Pal, Bhadrakanta Mistry, Bhabatosh Mondal and Rabin Ray.

Adjacent to the school, there was a big football ground. On the other side there was a hospital. The market was not very far from there. In the market, there were more than 100 stable shops where vegetables, rice, fish and other daily essentials were

available. On top of that, every evening local people used to sell vegetables, fruits and fish in the market. Everyday, after the school hours, the teachers along with the students would visit the market and beg for monetary help. With that money, we would buy books, notebooks, pencils and slates for the children. People living in adjacent villages like Kumirmari, Mollakhali, Choto Mollakhali, Sandeshkhali were very compassionate towards our needs and helped us from time to time. Many Missions used to donate books to us. Seeing our condition, Daya Mukhejee also helped us with books. We started off with a lot of hope in our heart.

Some non-governmental relief organizations started providing us with food supplies. With their assistance, we also arranged for drinking water in our area. We installed a few tube wells. The quality of water was unparalleled all over West Bengal. The relief organizations as well as many sympathizers used to provide us with foods, medicines and blankets. With everybody's effort and constant toil, a beautiful living condition was created without the help of the government. The new colony was named 'Netaji Nagar'. The school was called 'Netaji Nagar Uchcha Vidyapith'. The number of students in the school was almost 4000. Afterwards, the number of teachers increased to 25.

On 24/01/79, the Government of West Bengal's police force imposed an economic blockade at Marichjhapi and stopped all food and water supplies. Due to lack of food, the sound of helpless screams could be heard from every room. Police continued to patrol the area day and night. People, left with no other alternatives, began eating boiled grass, leaves and fish. There was a kind of salty grass that was typical of that area. It was called 'jadu ghas'. We named the grass 'yoti palong' after the name of our magnanimous Chief Minister.

The strict imposition of the blockade took the lives of 27 people. The government gave their statement, "If they do not go back to Dandakaranya, they will be starved to death."

The blockade was not the end of oppression. On 24/1/79, being driven by extreme thirst, some women tried to cross the river by boat to fetch water from Kumirmari. But, their boats were rammed into by police launches and got drowned. Following that, 4 rounds of tear gas were thrown at them. Being agitated at this inhuman

police oppression, local people rose up in protest. In response, police resorted to lathi charge and fired tear gas to quell the mob. 3 women were found in almost dying condition. On 29/1/79, our embankments were destroyed. We got involved in an argument with the police. From 2 to 4 that noon countless tear gas were fired at us from the police launches. Consequently, Sunil, Malati, Parul and Ambini got severely injured. On 30/1/1979, a launch came to the shore and we were enquired if we wanted to go back to Dandakaranya. The refugees shouted out in unison, "We are ready to die, but we are not going back to Dandakaranya." The mechanism of oppression became more and more active after that. At 1 am, 10 more rounds of tear gas were fired at us. The torture got increasingly intense with time. On 31/1/79, Wednesday, from 10 in the morning, police started throwing tear gas at us constantly.

On the other hand, as the refugees attempted further to cross the river to secure food and water, their boats were destroyed by the police launches. Tear gas shells were lobbed at them. Being utterly helpless, they tried to swim across the river to reach Kumirmari. But, they were suppressed with tear gas. After observing the situation, local people of Kumirmari came forward and formed a crowd. The situation was gradually getting heated. At about 3 pm, bullets and tear gas shells started raining down on them. At Netaji Nagar, police fired 2 rounds of bullets. Afterwards, at Kumirmari, 30 rounds of bullets were shot. In total, 32 rounds of bullets were used. Irrespective of men, women, young and elderly, none was able to escape the brutal lathicharge carried out by the police.

During that time, a group of policemen entered a house at Kumirmari and killed a woman. The woman, carrying a child in her lap, was shot dead. The child survived as the bullet didn't hit its body. The policemen forcefully pulled the woman out of the room. As her elder son witnessed this, he got livid with rage. The policemen took him to the launch and attempted to shoot him. But following the officer's order, they didn't kill him, but kicked him out of the launch into the river. At the same time, a child was smothered to death by feet.

As a result of this inhuman and brutal genocide, the death toll reached 40 with included both locals and refugees. The corpses were taken to Sandeshkhali Police Station on the day of the incident. Their bellies were cut through with a bayonet

and the corpses were floated into the river Belasjaria. There were some half-dead among them who were killed by pricking the bayonet on their bodies. One of these aforementioned corpses was found in the Garali river. Some of the dead bodies were thrown at the Kalagachia river.

Next day, local people rose up in protest against the heinous police atrocities and conducted a rally up to the police camp. Police fired 2 rounds of bullets at the gathering. One of the locals got badly injured. Following the whole incident, 150 refugees including women were arrested.

Even after bearing with this level of torture, we remained undaunted in our demands. When they were unsuccessful in driving us away, the leaders tried to deceive the countrymen into believing that we were trying to set up a separate state in Marichjhapi having teamed up with external forces. They alleged us of throwing a challenge against the Government of West Bengal and suspected that we were being supported with weapons from outside.

Eventually, one day, a group of policemen entered Netaji Nagar at Marichjhapi island. A huge number of armed personnel marched into our locality and began searching if we had any foreign weapons stored in our rooms. Our schools and health clinics were turned into police camps. Their non-stop operation went on for 7 days. When their mission failed, the policemen along with their hired goons attacked our huts and started to beat us badly without any reason. Being terrified, people started to escape in the jungle or they swam across the river and fled. Those of us who were caught, were taken to the launch. Everyone was ready to give their life but not to give up. Men were captured, women and children were forcefully taken to the launches and the shanties were set ablaze. The island resonated with the loudest screams of these helpless people. This ritual of destruction continued on the following day as well. Who keeps count of the death of so many infants and elderlies! When we ran towards the flea market, we saw the area was consumed by fire. Generally, at night, nobody used to stay in that place. Some police officers took me to Amiya Babu (Amiya Kumar Samanta, S.P.). I went with them alone. He was sitting on a chair made by us. A table was right in front of him. He asked me, "What is your name?" When I said my name is Nirmalendu Dhali, his answer was, "So, you are that master." He was probably familiar with my name. He said,

“Look, you cannot stay here anymore. The government won't allow you to stay here. We will evacuate this place tomorrow. I am telling you this because you are a teacher and I am very impressed with what I've heard about your personal life in the last 2-3 days. It was nice meeting you. We will arrange for a launch to take you and your family to Canning. From there, our men will take you to wherever you wish to go.” I still remember his words. This is the behavior I received from him. I replied back to him saying, “Sir, if you were in my place, would you be able to escape in the darkness of the night?” He said, “That's up to you. I've just said that I am satisfied with you and that's why I want to help you. If you don't want to take my help, the police will take you to the launch right now. You will be evicted from here nonetheless.” I said, “That is entirely your decision. But I will not leave Marichjhapi voluntarily.” He replied, “Your big leaders have already escaped. What will you do here? This is sheer immaturity.” My age was 24 /25 back then.

Q: What was the role of Rangalal Goldar?

A : Rangalal Goldar was a veteran politician. He was a learned and intelligent man. As far as I know, he was instrumental in the formation of the organization. . . . Within the following noon, the entire area was evacuated. Police took everyone to Canning or Hasnabad by launch. Those who didn't ride the launches voluntarily, were forced to do so. From there, the refugees went to Dandakaranya, either by themselves or with the help of the government. Some of them stayed in West Bengal and some others went to different parts of the country with their relatives' help. I was taken to the police launch at night. I had my wife and my father with me. My sister got married during our stay at Mana camp. My mother and grandmother died at Mana camp as well. Those unwilling to go were met with horrific consequences. Even the kids were forcibly thrown into the launch. Police gathered a few local people who were basically supported by the ruling party. They were not uniformed men. Along with the policemen, a large number of people invaded the locality. They were throwing away our furniture into the river. The kids were hurled into the launches. There were many incidents like this. That night, along with me, many refugees were taken to the launch. Next day, we reached Canning. Afterwards we were carried to Basirhat court in a lorry. We stayed in front of the court for the entire day. Then, at night, they took us to Dum Dum Central Jail in a lorry and locked us up without any trial. I have mentioned before that a lot of people were arrested during the firing episode. As far as I understood

from the long queue, almost 500 people were there from Marichjhapi. One amongst the prisoners was a criminal who was charged with a murder. He was an old man. He used to look after us and was the leader of our group. Except for him, all of us were refugees from Marichjhapi. We were not released without bail. My father was 80 years old back then and he was literally penniless. He put in a lot of effort to convince an elderly lawyer to arrange for my bail within a month. My wife's mental health was on the verge of collapsing. Having been paroled from the lock up, I got to know from my father that they were kept in Burnpur camp. In a few dilapidated rooms the refugees were forced to live. My father and my wife were amongst them. I had nothing on my body except for a lungi and a drawer. For the last one month, this was my attire in the jail. I was marked with a seal on my hand so that my travel from the jail to the place of my convenience would be free of cost. My father and I landed at Burnpur station. As I reached the camp, I found my wife in a half-mad state. Sometimes she behaved sensibly, but other times her behavior was insane. When I asked my father about this, he said that my wife turned into a mentally unstable person lately. I was there for 4-5 days. From there, I was taken to Malkangiri. From then on, I have been staying here.

Q : The government raised a few allegations against the Marichjhapi refugees that they had some external links, especially with Pakistan....

A : You have reminded me of a very important thing. There was a cartoon published in Anandabazar. I used to keep paper cuttings during that time. Jyoti Babu was in confrontation with the refugees while Santish Babu was at the side of the refugees. I am not sure whether it was published in Anandabazar or in Yugantar. I also do not have that paper cutting with me now.

Q : Do you remember anything else?

A : All this happened a long time ago. My memory fails me now. Since then, I have been living in Malkangiri. Everyone's condition is not the same. But I can say, we are living like orphans. For instance, if a race is deprived of their mother tongue or their legitimate political rights, how long will it take for them to become extinct from the face of this earth? This question always haunts me. You guys are also from West Bengal. You try to understand what I am saying. Here, you won't find any school, college or a library where a Bengali book can be found or the language is taught. Secondly, until recently, we could at least take part in politics because in

Malkangiri there were 2 assembly election centers. One of them was for SCs and the other one was for STs. Among us Bengalis, we have a few SCs, so we used to get a chance to take part in the election. But at present, we are also robbed off that opportunity because the seats are now preserved for the STs only. So nobody other than an ST can compete in the election. Consequently, we are automatically out of the game because among the Bengalis we have people belonging to SC, OBC and higher castes. We have thus been deprived of our political rights as well. How can we have a good life here?

Q : Still today, you all are referred to as ‘saranarathi’?

A : Yes. We are referred to as ‘Bangiya Saranarathi’. The government of the state we are currently living in identifies us a ‘Bangiya Saranarathi’ whenever they speak or write anything about us, be it good or bad.

Q: As you have lost many of your family members, how many people are here who have met with the same fate?

A : There are many amongst us who have returned here having lost their children. You need to go in search of those families. It will be time-consuming, but you will definitely find such families.

Q: Do you have any complaint against ‘Udbastu Unnoyonshil Samiti’ under whose leadership you went to Marichjhapi?

A : To speak about complaints, Rangalal Goldar suggested that we should leave the plantation area and set up our habitations in other parts of Marichjhapi. But, Raiharan Barei and one other leader did not follow this advice and took us to the plantation area. There were plenty of coconut and tamarisk trees. And when we built our habitations over there, police barricaded us on all sides. We had nothing to feed your stomach. Being driven by extreme hunger, we were compelled to eat the tender leaves of coconut trees. So, in that way, we damaged government properties. I have this personal grudge against Raiharan Babu that he didn't consider Rangalal Babu's advice and endangered our lives. If we had not set up our habitations in the plantation area, the government might not have taken such harsh steps against us, who knows.

Q : Do you know where these leaders are at present?

A : I've heard that Arabinda Babu stays in Machlandapur at present. I don't know if Rangalal Babu is still alive or not. Rabin Chakraborty has become a priest at Mana Kali Mandir. I saw him there a few years ago. I don't know anything about the rest.

Netaji Nagar Bidyapith, Marichjhapi

Alpona Biswas

[When everyone else was trying to deal with the tear-gas attack, police was literally dragging them forcefully to the launches, people were trying to cling onto their last belongings, Srimati Tarubala Devi, the headmaster's wife, refused to give in to the police and went inside the school. From there she collected the files and papers as much as she could grab within that brief period of time.]

‘That expression of man is the greatest which is not solely a personal one but can be accepted by everyone across times. . . . Along with his own advancement, a man should overcome all the barriers to become a part of the greater humanity,’ - Rabindranath.

I went to Dandakaranya in search of these people. They are the subordinates of a free country.

From Howrah to Koraput, it's a 24 hours journey. Having spent the night there, I traveled 130 kilometers of uneven and disastrous road to reach Malkangiri the next day. From there, the bus went 30 kilometers further via Pottru and halted for a brief period of time at Pulli Metla (Adivasi name). Then, the bus drove through a laterite track to take us to the interior of the village MV 11 (Malkangiri-Potturu village). A few houses were scattered here and there bearing the marks of poverty. Boys and girls of 10-12 years were taking cattles to the fields for grazing. They were having puja vacation during that time.

‘The cowboy takes the herd of cattles to the field
The children concentrate on their studies.’

These two lines attached with the nostalgia of Bengali children cannot be applied to the children living here. Here, the words 'field' and 'study' seem intertwined with each other. They were looking at the Bengalis who had come from Bengal with sheer astonishment. In the fields afar, the hills were standing as witnesses of history. Pouring rain for a few days has blessed the village with the shadow of the growing trees. Each house was surrounded with the branches and leaves of a tree. Trees like bitter melon and other weeds have formed the outer fence of a house. The room was covered with a tiled roof. It was standing with the sophistication of poverty.

The area was unnaturally quiet. At the courtyard, 4-5 cows were tied to the poles and they were driving away flies from their bodies with their tails very casually. On the veranda, almost 6'5" tall Nirmalendu Dhali was sitting straight in the posture of vajrasana. His age was 50-55. He was the headmaster of Netaji Nagar Vidyapith, situated in Marichjhapi, P.O. Kumirmari, 24 Pgs, West Bengal. He was firm-jawed and from his eyes one could understand the suffering he had undergone. Perhaps his long-hidden self of a teacher was awakened when he set eyes on me.

Since I was going to the village, Nirmal Babu himself took all the initiative to renovate the houses. But, malaria created a hindrance as it severely affected the lives of people living here twice or thrice a year.

His wife was Tarulata Dhali. Their only daughter was already married. The name of their boy was Dibakar Dhali, aged 20-22, was very polite and gentle. They had a shop at the Poturru market. Dibakar sits at the shop. They also have a little land. The family somehow manages to earn both ends meet. Meanwhile, Nirmal Babu has earned fame as an actor. People like Nirmal Dhali and Kalimela's Subhas Tarafder are trying their best to save Bengali culture. Subhas Tarafder has a remarkable flair for writing.

Nirmal Babu was elected as the Panchayat head twice. Though he had ample opportunities to misuse his position and power, he never did that. He was a true teacher. My intention was to collect facts regarding Marichjhapi's Netaji Nagar Vidyapith.

While sipping a cup of tea I asked, “You went to Marichjhapi in April ’78. In May 1979, you were compelled to relocate again in Dandakaranya owing to constant oppression by the police of West Bengal and their hired goons. How did you manage to set up such a big school within so little time? From junior class to class VIII, almost three and a half thousand students enrolled in the school. How is it possible? How did you collect funds for it?”

His jaw tightened all of a sudden. His eyes fumed with hatred. He stood up like a severed bow. He moved towards his room, shivering. His wife Tarubala went with him as an assistant. She too knows the answer.

This reaction from the headmaster was expected by the person asking the question. The reason was known to both sides. As seen in the fables, the lamb was accused of polluting the lion's drinking water just for the sake of the lion's own benefit, likewise, comrade Pramod Dasgupta brought false charges of foreign monetary transactions against the Bengali refugees to evict them from Marichjhapi. This was the actual motif.

‘A few responsible persons have interest to learn correct and complete information about Dandakaranya.’ These words of IAS Saibal Gupta blurted out of his angst about the matter, instigated the curiosity in me which I had suppressed this far. I started my journey towards Dandak.

Dandakaranya was possible only because of Bengali intelligence and diligence.

Dandakaranya was born on 12th September, 1958. It was a perfect place for rehabilitation or exile for the Bengalis since they were the ones who were sacrificed for our Independence and consequently, these refugees were treated as leftovers by the power-mongers of left and right wing politicians.

When Congress was in power, truckloads and trainloads of refugees burdened with the loss of their dear ones were taken to Dandakaranya. They were disposed of amidst this dangerous forest that was exposed to wild animals.

It was decided that Andhra, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa would leave certain portions of their state for the Dandakaranya project. But later on, Maharashtra and Andhra refused to cooperate. They were willing to arrange for rehabilitation on their own terms, but they didn't wish to be a part of the Dandak project. As a result, the future of the project was now dependent solely on Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. So, the areas falling under Dandakaranya were Orissa's Koraput and Kalahandi and Madhya Pradesh's Bastar district.

Initially, the area comprised 80,000 square miles which was completely a forest region. It is evident that the prime purpose of bringing the Bengalis here was to transform the forestland into an agricultural land. They were not given the dignity of humans, rather, they were enrolled in the labor camps as unpaid laborers.

These villages were unnamed, unplanned, unsafe, devoid of food, water and health facilities. They were only recognisable from their numbers.

MV (Malkan Village) - 133.

UV (Umarkot Village) - 64.

And, Kondangan - 16.

Their identity was, for example, MV 11, PV 13, UV 7 etc.

The distance between two villages was at least 25/30 kilometers. It was a strategy to cut off the communication system because living together, the refugees might turn into an explosive weapon.

“See, madam, see. You also send your children to school. In your schools, there are stairs of progress, in our schools it is mere survival.”

Dusting the layers of exploitation, betrayal and humiliation, he took out a file. On top of it, ‘Netaji Nagar Vidyapith’ was written. And while rubbing the dust off the file, he raised a very logical question.

“Madam, the Punjabis were rehabilitated in Punjab. Then why were the Bengalis deprived of living in Bengal? Have you, the gentlemen from the city, ever thought about this? No. If you had spared a little thought, the Marichjhapi episode could

not be hidden behind the curtains for 30 long years. And, the political leaders? There is an opposition to every government. What did they do?"

When sunlight passes through a prism, the light gets separated into seven different colours, otherwise only a single colour remains visible. Similarly, political colour keeps changing among the masses. On a higher level, it's all the same.

Very carefully he opened the files and passed them to me saying, "Have a look. I have protected them with all my strength as a testimony of truth. Have a look."

"We were alleged to have left Dandakaranya without any valid reason and coming here in Marichjhapi we set up schools, hospitals and markets with the aid of foreign funds and indulged in terrorist activities. This is what we were accused of doing. Read the facts and then write."

I arranged the facts in sequential order. What superpower has made it possible to set up a school within such a short period of time! That too without any government grants! From where they attained such power!

I am transcribing a section from a letter written on 25/9/77. It was written by Shri Satish Mondal, the secretary of 'Sara Bharat Udbastu Unnoyonshil Samiti' from Mana Camp located in Raipur, Madhya Pradesh.

"Refugee brothers and sisters,
..... The minority Hindus are being subjected to inhuman oppression in Bangladesh. Following this, our brothers and sisters are migrating to India in large numbers to save their life and dignity..... We have reached such a point that if we fail to fight for demands like the Pakistanis, we will never get a chance to live like proper human beings in future. So, going beyond groupism and any kind of discrimination, we should co-operate, support and provide monetary assistance to the Samiti to make it more powerful and strengthened."

The secretary of the Samiti has advised to look beyond petty groupism. From the next section of the letter, we would realize how much faith he had in the besoy selected Left Front government.

On 16/9/77, we had a long discussion on the rehabilitation process with the Left Front government in West Bengal. Following that, on 21/9/77, members of the legislative assembly Sri Haripada Bharati (Janta), Sri Suhrid Chaudhuri and other leaders voiced their concerns in Vidhan Sabha for the refugees living outside Bengal. They said that it was more of an exile than rehabilitation. Everywhere, refugees are staying in an infernal living condition. They proposed that since all the refugees are Bengalis, they should be rehabilitated in the Sunderbans and they should also be compensated in the same manner as the West Pakistanis.

This news went on air on 21/9/77 from Akashvani, Kolkata and was published in newspapers on the following day.

Shri Ram Chatterjee (Minister of State Home Civil Defense Department), a sympathiser of the refugees in West Bengal kept in constant contact with the leaders and the members of Lok Sabha to liberate the refugees from this dreadful condition and the inevitable doom.

Therefore, keep the peace and be patient for a few more days and let us be aware of the situation regularly through all the contact points. According to the instructions of the Samiti, engage yourselves to work for human welfare.'

Greetings to the fellow comrades

Jay Hind

Yours

(Satish Chandra Mondal)

Secretary

Udbastu Unnoyonshil Samiti

Mana Camp

Raipur, MP

It is evident that until then, even after the Left Front came to power in 1977, the refugees had high hopes in their hearts. There was not a tinge of negativity in their approach.

So, there is no point in thinking that the refugees declared a war against the government and formed their settlement in Marichjhapi. It is again baseless to claim that they sought foreign funds to jeopardise the government.

Now, we will talk about the education system in Marichjhapi.

It is difficult to even imagine that the government, who refused to provide food and shelter to the thousands of families, will take up the responsibility of their education.

So, I asked the Headmaster of Netaji Nagar Vidyapith about how such a big educational institution was formed. During that time, it became more important to protect the documents rather than protecting one's life in the face of tremendous oppression. We will come to that later.

For some part of it, we need to depend on the memories of the Headmaster.

For instance, from February '78 onwards, the refugees living in Dandakaranya started making preparations to return to Bengal and by April '78, they arrived at Marichjhapi. Unfortunately, except for the air and the soil, there was nothing to welcome them in Bengal. They had to arrange for everything themselves. For example,

“The Samiti called for an urgent meeting. All the refugees who had arrived at Marichjhapi by then, attended the meeting. Satish Babu, Rabin Babu, Rangalal Babu, Raiharan Babu, Arabinda Babu and other youth members. The topics of discussion were - living arrangements, drinking water, health, education, law and order, dam construction etc. Building an embankment to protect the island from high tide was given the utmost priority. Then, there were other issues like building houses etc. People were divided in 5 sectors with 1 person taking the charge of each of the groups.

Satish Babu was given the responsibility of building the embankment. Health sector was handed over to Samir Samaddar. I was asked to look after the education.”- Headmaster.

And, he managed to fulfill this huge responsibility so successfully that within 2 months almost 2.5-3 thousand students enrolled in the school.

Gradually, he started taking out all the documents from the files. It really needed a splendid design to pull off such an impossible task.

First document, a notice

Dated : 15/12/78

To
The Secretary
Udbastu Unnoyonshil Samiti (All India)
Netaji Nagar, 24 Pgs

Respected Sir,

With due respect I would like to state that on 25th December, Friday at 3 pm, a special meeting will be held for the sake of the welfare of the school.

So, it's an earnest request to you to be present there along with all the members of the Samiti.

Yours faithfully,
Headmaster
Nirmal Dhali

Place : School premise.

Date : 15/12/78

From this meeting, held on 15/12/78, the entire thing became clear to us as the sky of Dandakaranya.

Dibakar, a handsome young man, came up with a huge rohu fish hanging on a thread tied to the gills.

“Kakima, who will cook? Tell me how to cook this.”

“My god! I certainly won't. Wait. Let me know the secrets from your father. After that, I will get back to you.”

Dibakar said, proudly, “They are more precious to father than his own life. But he is sick. He might not be able to show everything.”

Meanwhile, the Headmaster was eagerly waiting for my response after handing over to me the page that contained the decision taken in the meeting on 15/12/78.

“Today, on 25th December, 1978, at 3 in the afternoon, in order to build a bright future for the poverty-stricken refugee students through a fundamental and just social system, this newly-constructed educational institution decided to form an advisory committee for organising ‘Teachers' Day’ on 20th September.

Sri Satish Mondal, the permanent secretary of ‘Udbastu Unnoyonshil Samiti’ (All India) presided over the meeting.

With everyone's support, the following decisions were taken in the meeting.

1. According to the proposal as well as active support of the guardians of the students, an advisory committee consisting of 9 members were formed. The newly appointed members will decide their posts according to their experiences and skills in different sectors. Keeping in mind the importance of the refugee crisis as well as their struggle for survival, the right to unhindered entry will be provided to the learners and the experienced personalities for a proper discussion on the topic of general and fundamental spread of education and the processes that would make it possible so that this school soon becomes an ideal educational institution.

The teachers and the members of the advisory committee should be highly attentive to this purpose.

Elected members

1. Sri Nirmalendu Dhali (Headmaster)
2. Sri Rangalal Goldar (Main Adviser)
3. Sri Arabinda Mistry (Secretary)
4. Sri Atul Krishna Ray (Asst. Secretary)

Signature

”
”
”
”

5. Sri Samir Samaddar (Cashier) ”
6. Sripada Mondal (Member) ”
7. Sri Birenda Gain (,,) ”
8. Sri Dwijendralal Mistry (,,) ”
9. Sri Arun Kumar Ray (,,) ”

The meeting ends with thanks to the secretary.

Satish Mondal
Secretary
15/12/78

Following this, in a meeting dated 1/9/79, the duties allotted to each person has been clearly stated.

Decision :

1. In terms of governing the school, the secretary is accountable to the committee.
2. In the points ‘क’ to ‘ज’ of the column titled ‘Duty of the secretary’, the usual duties of the secretary has been recorded.

In the column titled ‘Responsibility of the council’ - two duties have been mentioned under the points ‘क’ and ‘ख’.

Each week, on Sunday at 8 am, the members of the council and the teachers will sit for a discussion. A public meeting will be held once a month.

The most important part is the duties assigned to the teachers :

- Breaking away from the conventional teaching methods the teachers should coordinate with each other to form an ideal educational system.
- They should maintain a righteous and ethical atmosphere as well as proper discipline in the school and have a cordial relationship with the guardians.
- The teachers should follow a proper code of conduct which would help the students in character building.
- They have the right to spend 100 rupees from the school fund in case of an emergency, they can also select books for the library etc.

In the second answer, many people like me will find an answer to their question.

Within 2 days, seeking assistance from the secretary to build the roof of the room and to collect funds for exams from people by notice or by beating drums should be done with utmost priority.

Except for this, there is a list of the teachers and the members of the council from whom funds will be collected to conduct the examination.

1. Sri Samir Samddar	10.00 (deposit)
2. Dwijendranath Mistry	5.00 (,,)
3. Biren Gain	2.00 (,,)
4. Arun Ray	5.00 (,,)
5. Atulkrishnana Ray	25.00 (,,)
6. Arabinda Mistry	21.00 (,,)
7. Rangalal Goldar	29.00 (,,)
8. Sripada Mondal	6.00 (,,)
9. Nirmal Dhali	5.00 (,,)
10. Rabindranath Mondal	2.00 (,,)

The common people were requested to donate voluntarily. The call was well responded to. For example, Sibapada Sarkar donated 2.00 rupees.

In that meeting, duties related to teaching aid and collection of Netaji's picture were allotted. One of the teachers was appointed to carry out the task of forming a volunteer group with the students of higher classes. This group was supposed to take part in the all round development of the school as well as social service.

Usually, the co-educational institutions did not allow a lady teacher to be a member of the governing body which led to the tension related to their rights in the parliament. But, it is important to note that in this meeting, the so-called uneducated people voluntarily included Srimati Kanika Biswas in the governing committee of the school.

In the next meeting, dated 8/9/78, two most important things were - to determine their future plan of actions and to plan a programme for observing Netaji's birthday on the following 23rd January.

It was also informed that the committee has deposited 200 rupees to the secretary for school expenditure.

- If a member of the council undergoes personal, moral and social lapse, his membership would be canceled.
- If a student studying in class 8 seeks permission to be admitted to a different school, his/her application will be rejected.
- In case of unpaid teachers, it was decided that the applicant must be a resident of Netaji Nagar. He will be appointed in the post only after the completion of a proper training.
- It was also decided in the meeting that, from 21st to 23rd January, patriotic songs and poetry, competitions related to Netaji's biography, sports competition, speech competition etc. will be held.

In the meeting held on 15/9/78, it was decided that the annual result of the examination would be declared on 8/1/79. It would be followed by a one-day leave, that is on 9/1/79 and on 10/1/79, after the prayer training will be given on different topics on Netaji.

There was a discussion on setting up two new primary schools. It was also decided that no educated person from outside will be appointed as a teacher. Because, it was thought that the idealism and motivation required for doing this kind of work could only be acquired by a person who had been a victim of this circumstance. Without the drive of earning both ends meet, this dedication is not possible.

But, from 1/1/79 to 8/1/79, there was a call for applications for the post of new teachers. The salary of the teachers was also discussed in the meeting.

Although the institution was economically insolvent, its academic excellence was never compromised. Within limited resources, a library was also set up in the school.

5. A. Decision - to 'shift, expand and establish a library at a proper place'.

How many of

5.B. Decision - it is a tight slap on the face of those who 'believe in foreign aids'.

Following the order of the headmaster, I was reading the documents aloud. Having finished the first sentence, I looked at him, embarrassed. His distant eyes had taken him down the memory lane to the premises of the school.

The sentence is -

"Teachers, members of the advisory committee and students are charged with the responsibility to put covering over the school building. They will do it with their own hands.

In the meeting dated, 26/9/—

Two unpaid teachers who have been qualified in the recruitment exam on 10/1/79, have been directed to assume their duty between 15/1/79 - 17/1/79.

Their names are Bijay Krishna Mondal and Gitarani Mondal.

Following that, in the notice dated 11/1/79, the guardians are informed to admit the students within 23/1/79.

On 14/1/79, the announcement was made regarding the teachers' pay raise. For nine teachers, the new salary was 990 rupees per month. The salary of three other teachers was still under consideration.

The headmaster was given the responsibility to prepare the textbooklet.

The announcement was made regarding the programme schedule from 5 in the morning to 12 at night for 23rd January celebration. It was also decided that on 23rd January, on the occasion of 30th birth anniversary of Subhas Chandra Bose and 17th Samiti Dibas, the meritorious students of class 12 will be awarded with shirts and pants.

I was stunned for a moment. Reality in its starkest form had hit me hard in Dandak earlier. Here, too, I experienced the same. At the pinnacle of civilization's chariot, their flag flies high. The chariot smashes off the inhuman power mongers under its wheels. For ages, their names are pronounced in the court of common people.

While turning over the pages containing information about Marichjhapi Netaji Nagar Vidyapith, I also became a part of their journey unknowingly. I realised that looking at the notice dated 26/1/79. The notice was issued by Raiharan Barei, not by the headmaster.

General secretary
Udbastu Unnoyonshil Samiti
(All India)
Netaji Nagar, Marichjhapi

The notice says that the samiti and the Netaji Nagar School will remain open from 8 am to 1 pm from 27th January, 1979 onwards.

It seemed to have struck a slightly discordant note.

In an urgent meeting on 25/2/79, a decision was taken in favour of supporting the students' strike protesting against the brutal atrocities perpetrated by the state government on the refugees of Marichjhapi.

So, they did not break down under government atrocities. It is evident from the fact that on 9/4/79, applications were invited for the recruitment of 4 teachers. On 25/4/79, the school Secretary sent a letter to the Secretary of the committee where he requested to arrange for the supply of essentials to recover from the rapidly deteriorating condition of Vidyapith. The students as well as the teachers used to visit the markets and literally begged for money to gather the expenses of the examination.

On 30/4/79, the recruitment exam was taken. On 4/5/79, Smt. Gitarani Mistry had been asked to be present with proper documents within a month. This was the last appointment in Marichjhapi Vidyapith.

My heart was saddened. Tears streamed down my eyes. Similar to the feeling I underwent while standing on the ruins of Nalanda University, I got a lump in my throat.

'Kakima! Food has been prepared! Come, have your meal!' Dibakar! He hasn't been to Marichjhapi, hasn't seen Bengal, doesn't even know Bangla script, does he want to go to Bengal?

Answer : My parents have undergone immense suffering. If that is the case, I don't want to go to Bengal at all. But, having heard stories from their mouths, I have grown an attachment towards the land. You are such a nice person, Kakima. Then, why did this happen? Isn't everyone so generous like you?

While having lunch, I listened to the reminiscences of the headmaster's wife Smt. Tarubala Dhali.

It is indeed the truth! Police literally manhandled Nirmal Dhali and dragged him out while he was sleeping wearing merely a lungi. Following that he had to spend the whole month in lockup without any trial with that single piece of cloth on. Marichjhapi was in ruins! Then, how was the file saved!

When everyone else was trying to deal with the tear-gas attack, police was literally dragging them forcefully to the launches, people were trying to cling onto their last belongings, Srimati Tarubala Devi, the headmaster's wife, refused to give in to the police and went inside the school. From there she collected the files and papers as much as she could grab within that brief period of time. Then, being baffled by the state of things, she took her father-in-law to the station for shelter. Day after day, she used to spend the days at the gate of the jail and went back to her father in law at night. Seeing the chances of her husband's parole getting narrower with days, she started losing her mental stability. But, despite dealing with all this, she never let go of the remnants of her husband's dreams. The evidence of her invincible determination is present in my hand, at this moment.

Two lines of a revolutionary poet flashes on my mind right now -

"The world is full of great creations for the welfare of humans
If half of them is done by men, half of them by women."

That day, as I returned from the house of the headmaster of Nataji Nagar
Vidyapith, Marichjhapi, I felt rejuvenated.

Marichjhapi is still an abandoned island. Its heart is laden with sadness.

To Jyoti Basu, at the Writer's

Satish Mondal

[Satish Mondal only knew how to write his name. But through his sharp intelligence and honesty, he became the leader of all.]

When we met Jyoti Basu at the Writer's, we told him, "Sir, you are a Bengali and you possess absolute power. We have a request that to form a large-scale impact we need to take the refugee movement to Delhi and we want the oppression we would face in the process to be circulated in the newspapers according to your capacity." Having listened to this, Basu replied, "Now you people would teach me how to give leadership?" I said, "Of course not. Why are you saying that? So, instead of Delhi, we have to form the movement in West Bengal. The Bengalis, who will survive the oppression might come forward to help us. Nothing more than that." I added, "Since you haven't helped us in any way, it should be written in the history that Jyoti Babu did nothing for us. We are half-dead, left with nothing to lose. Our only request to you is to stop this inhuman police oppression on us." I can't remember every detail now. My brain doesn't function properly.

Q : No no. This is enough. I didn't expect this much from you. It is a duty of the next generation to protect the history of Marichjhapi. Atleast, some real facts should come out and we should focus on that right now. I haven't arrived here in the morning just to take photos of the two of you. I informed boudi that we would come in the morning, but last night I had a talk with Rabin Chakraborty. When I

heard that he would also come...If he could bring the book, the author of the book knows both of you. He has provided me with your address and other arrangements.

Satish : Mejo bouma, in my room, beside the t.v. amidst the clothes you will find a book.

Rabindranath : Which book?

Q : Marichjhapi.

S : Oh. There is no other book then!

Q : After that, didn't you feel the urgency to spread as well as keep the awareness in the minds of the coming generation? Did you feel anything like this?

S : Yes, that one in Machlandapur... (Meanwhile, Sohini has brought the book. Satish is leafing through the book.)

Q : Did you go through the book last night? Or, didn't you?

S : (Nods, suggesting a no, continues leafing through the book and read it with curiosity despite suffering from illness)

P : In this book, the journalists, who were with you during that time, have recorded all the facts provided by you and collected from various documents. I will send a few copies of the book. I am yet to give one to Rabin Babu since I only bought this one copy. O yes, you were saying something about Maslandapur....

S : They are planning to form a movement once again and provide monetary aid as well. I said, while the previous movement did not bear any fruit, what is the point of doing it again!

Q : If you are called again to give leadership in a movement in Marichjhapi, will you go?

S : I have prior experience... but I have grown old. To be a leader....You should free yourself from the shackles of fear. If you are timid, you cannot be a leader!

R : My heart wants it badly, but my physical strength betrays me.

Q : But the experience is very precious.

S : It solely depends on you. We cannot comment on that. But, it's not possible now to gather the number of people we managed to do previously. Innumerable people have suffered immense amounts of hardships to migrate from one country to another and in the process, a large number of them have succumbed to death.

Q : What can be the approximate number of people in the case of Marichjhapi? How many families had migrated? How many of them had returned?

S : Listen, many of us had gone to Marichjhapi. There, we were suppressed with bullets. Almost 80-90 people lost their lives. Following the incident, people started going back. Government was also trying to take us back. The Janata Party was in the government during that time.

R : Janta in the centre and C.P.I.M in West Bengal.

S : Delhi promised to help us but our hopes were betrayed. C.P.I.M had 36 MPs in the Lok Sabha. They, too, did not help us at all. To tell the truth, we do not have the power that is required to do something big.....

Interview : 27 May, 2006.

From Beginning to End

Rabin Chakraborty

[Rabin Chakraborty was the secretary of 'Udabstu Unnoyonshil Samiti'. He has been arrested multiple times for participating in the movement for the refugees.]

Rabin : The name of our organization was 'Udbastu Unnoyonshil Samiti'.

Q : Which post did you hold? Who were in other posts?

Rabin : I was the vice president of the organization while Satish Mondal was the president. Raiharan Barei was the secretary. Arabinda Mistry and Kalinarayan Bose hold the post of joint secretary. Rangalal Goldar was the chief cashier. Mahadeb Das was one of many members in the organization.

Q : Who are the ones with whom you are still in contact?

R : I am still in contact with Satish Da. Rest of the members live in Kolkata at present. I have no connection with them.

Q : In which year this organisation was formed?

R : I don't remember the exact year. But it was definitely after '70, most probably in 72-73.

Q : In which year did you migrate from East Bengal? Who else came along with you?

R : I came here in 1965. More than 1 lakh families arrived here. There were many camps here at that time - Mana camp, Kurud camp, Barda camp, Manavata camp, Noagaon camp, Kendri camp and many more. Our organization comprised members from all the camps. Even in Madhya Pradesh's Betul, our organization showed its presence. That means, our organization brought together the refugees from all over the country,

Q : Why did you think of going to Marichjhapi?

R : Because, we are Bengalis! We always want to stay in the vicinity of Bengal. In addition, here in this desert, we could hardly find any water in those days. The situation is a little better lately. The places I have been to, i.e. in Maharashtra, there was a huge water crisis. As a result, no harvesting was possible. The lands we were provided with were in the upper slopes of the hills whereas those of the Adivasis were located in the lower slopes. The rainwater used to come downhill to the lower slopes. The upper slopes remained deprived of water. It was a huge disadvantage for us. Previously, the condition of Betul was terrible. If you had gone to the

market and it started raining, you would be in trouble. For 2-3 days, there was no scope for you to return home. I have been to Betul once. The bureaucrats conspired against me to get me arrested. I visited several camps in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra but didn't find any success. But as we shifted to Marichjhapi, we came to their notice. We had no source of income. The dole we were provided by the government was not sufficient for us. How could it be! In those days, rice cost 8 annas per seer in the market. Government gave it at 9 annas per kilo at the ration shop. They made it mandatory for us to buy rice from the ration shop. We knew the market price was cheaper, yet we had no other option but to buy it from the ration shop. There were other problems as well. If we wanted to perform 'Harir loot' (a ritual where sweets are scattered in plenty in honour of Hari) at your home, we had to take permission from the government. There was an authority to follow our actions. To perform rituals like 'Harir loot' or 'Kirtan', we needed to get permission from the government. A security guard was posted in front of our house during the ritual. This was a government policy. We had no freedom of speech. This is how we stayed there.

Q : Tell me about your experience in Marichjhapi. Before that, say something about the preparation you had taken before you set off for your journey.

R : To talk about the preparation, we had discussed the matter with the government and formed our organization. After the formation, we set our ultimatum that if we were to be sent somewhere for rehabilitation, we should be given the right to atleast survey the place in advance. We would relocate there only if we find the place suitable for living. But the government did not allow us to do that. They said that they would allocate those places for us which were available, be it a desert or a marshland. This discussion went on for several days. Then, we started a hunger strike in the demand of proper rehabilitation. The government did not pay much attention to it. We don't know who to accuse guilty, was it written in our destiny or was it the fault of the government! The hunger strike went on for more than a month. Following that, we started to fast till death. Now, the secretaries came to us and sat for discussion. Yet, they were not ready to fulfil our demands.

Representatives of the central government came from Delhi. Gobindaram, the deputy secretary of the rehabilitation department (I don't know if he is still there); Bose Babu and the chief secretary visited us. A meeting was held where the chief commissioner Nandy was present. But the meeting was not a success. Then, we

gave the ultimatum that we would go to Marichjhapi. We had gone to Marichjhapi previously. Most importantly, we are Bengalis and so, we wanted rehabilitation in Bengal. Locating Marichjhapi as a prospective place for rehabilitation happened automatically. We talked to various people regarding this and went to Marichjhapi. Satish Da, Rangalal Goldar, I and a few others went there to have a look at the living conditions.

What did we do there? We took a boat from Satjela. To travel by boat, you needed to cross a barricade. From Kumirmari to Marichjhapi, the fare was 5 rupees. So, we couldn't go to Marichjhapi. We looked at the place from outside and noticed that the land was fertile and plenty of coconut trees populated the island. We went to the bank.

Satish Da was with me. He said, if we get a chance to settle here, there is nothing like it. Following this visit, we took the plunge. The government tried to stop us in multiple ways, yet we were resilient enough to reach Marichjhapi. I don't remember the dates. We took trains from here and then we travelled by boat.

Q : Tell me about your experiences step by step.

R : We took a boat from Hasnabad to get to the side of the river. From there we took a launch. Finally, we reached Marichjhapi. A Smaller number of families arrived on the first day. Gradually the number of families increased as the days went by. I don't remember the exact number. The area in Marichjhapi was much larger than what you are now seeing in this Mana Camp. We occupied the alluvial lands on the sides of the canals and built our houses. Had we got at least a year's time! We never sought any help from the government. With our tireless labour, we made the land fertile and harvested paddy. But, paddy doesn't grow in salty land, so we didn't get much out of it. We found a space for farming fish as well.

Q : You were in contact with a few leaders and ministers from West Bengal.

R : Yes. We were in contact with Ram Chatterjee. Chatterjee came here. He visited other camps also. He himself said that this place was uninhabitable. Jyoti Basu held a meeting with us. He told us that instead of going to Marichjhapi we should consider a place called Jharkhali for rehabilitation. He said, "Some sections of

Jharkhali have already been taken for rehabilitation purposes by the central government. Still, there is a lot of space which is vacant and suitable for living. I can allocate that space for you and the rest will be sent to Andaman." But we tried to stick to our demand that we won't go anywhere except Marichjhapi. We had already set up houses, a hospital, a market, a school, and bakeries in Marichjhapi. People from nearby villages used to visit our market for business. Everything related to the household was available there. There were grocery shops, sweet shops, tea shops, stationery shops and bread bakeries. We constructed huge roads for transportation. Without taking help from labourers, we did it on our own by carrying soil on our heads. Marichjhapi was not a small place at all. I was not present in the meeting with Jyoti Basu. Satish Da, Raiharan, Arabinda Mistry and probably, Goldar were present in the meeting. I can't tell you what exactly happened there. The government wanted the meeting to happen confidentially since they hesitated to make these facts public. Now....

Q : But, ministers came here and sat with you for discussion. Then how could the matter remain a secret anymore? What exactly happened that triggered such a rift between the refugees and the government?

R : Now see, whatever we did we did everything by ourselves. We neither care much about the government, nor were we provided with any assistance on their part. We built all the houses with tireless physical labour. Now the government propagated the fact that our settlement in Marichjhapi was a political affair. They suffered from insecurity that after having settled there, we might form a separate state. So, they were apprehensive about our future activities. Previously, MP got splitted into two separate states. Same thing happened with Bihar. So, the government thought there was a probability that Marichjhapi might turn into a separate state as well. This discrimination might have arisen. Jyoti Basu's Left Front government was in power back then. Not only that, Pramod Dasgupta was the secretary of C.P.I.M.. We didn't realize that we would be subjected to so much torture despite having no fault of our own. We only demanded a place to live. We never sought any help from them or any other political parties. The river water was so salty that it was not fit for drinking at all. Adding 2-3 pipes to the tube well, we were getting sweetwater. That's why we installed 25/30 tube wells to solve the water crisis. I was there with my family from first to last. Torture? Yes, I was

indeed a witness! They first launched an attack in order to drive us away from the land. But we were determined not to go anywhere else. When we resisted, they charged tear gas. We had chengas. Do you know what a chenga is? It was made by cutting tree branches and keeping the two sides sharp. We used chenga as our weapon. But they charged tear gas and fired bullets at us rampantly. After launching 2-3 attacks like this, they went back, unsuccessful. We were starving. On top of that, we were subjected to continuous oppression. Our boats carrying rice, dal and vegetables to the market were blocked. Government seized everything and took them away. They formed a barricade to block our movement. Our food supply was completely stopped. Being in starvation for days, we lost all our strength to fight back. Still, we tried our best as long as we had an iota of strength left in us. We didn't let them enter. But the attack came from them at 4/4.30 in the morning. It is such a time when people sleep and if their sleep is disturbed by anything, they can't sleep anymore. The attack came from area no. 1 which was at the other end. Our locality in Marichjhapi was divided into zones which were numbered as 1,2,3,4... upto 7. Day and night we used to give sounds and guard the embankments. The attack was unleashed in the early morning. People stayed wide awake to resist the rampant attacks we were subjected to. As the morning approached, people started escaping from area no 1. There was utter chaos in the entire area. Nobody responded to my call. Satish da had probably arrived that very night. I was taken to the jungle along with Goldar Babu, the chief cashier. It was announced on the mic if we wanted to surrender or not. We had built a big high school. There was a huge field in front of the school building. Since meetings used to take place in the field, we planted banyan trees on both sides of the ground. Without having seen them you won't realise how wonderful it looked. Everything has been destroyed by now. They captured the big hall room, set up their wireless connection and made an announcement for us to surrender. They wanted to manipulate us by saying, "We are your friends. We won't harm you." But eventually, their tortures knew no bounds. They set our houses on fire. We took shelter in the forest. I spent a whole day and a night in the forest. I was scared of the police and not the tiger. When I was about to surrender, a boy said, "Why would you surrender alone? Everyone has already left." Satish Da, Raiharan, Arabinda Mistry - none of them was present there. Then, early in the morning, they took me to Canning by boat, riding through a very long route. At 3 am, Subrata Chatterjee sent his men to pick me up from there. There was an arrest warrant in

my name. Subrata probably was the president of 'Amra Bangali' and a civil engineer. When I left Marichjhapi, I didn't know where my family was. I met my family after 7 days. Subrata Chatterjee kept me in a room on the third floor for 3 days. He started visiting the writer's building to cancel my warrant. After many attempts, he was successful. Look, everyone is running after their own self-interests. We went to Marichjhapi with dreams in our eyes. But the government didn't let us fulfil our dreams. If they had given us a chance to stay there for 1 or 2 years, we definitely could have helped them. We had gained such control over the situation. But we didn't get any time. We don't know what went wrong. Was it written in our destiny or was it our sheer hard luck! We had zero disputes with the government previously. Then why did they become so brutally furious with us! Was there any reason for that? When leaders from all the police parties are coming together, how can such conflicts arise? There were Bengali leaders, Forward Block leaders who were in the government themselves, RSS leaders and CPIM leaders as well. 95% of our population belonged to the scheduled caste. Only a few people were from higher castes. They tried to breed disputes amongst us on this line. Although we belonged to the higher castes, we declared ourselves to be tribals or scheduled castes. Now, those people belonging to the higher castes whose surnames are Paul, Poddar, Sen, Chakraborty, Banerjee etc. were not ready to accept this. They thought, "How is it possible! How come we are all scheduled castes?" One morning, all of them came by forming a group and said, "What made us fall into the category of scheduled Castes?" I said, "You haven't been called scheduled castes. You will definitely write your name properly. But while talking about your identity, you should write that you are tribal. That is enough." A team came from Delhi to enquire if we actually were tribals or we were from higher castes. Do you understand? This way, they were up to pollute our minds with conflicts. I tried to make up for that by asking everyone to declare themselves as tribals while keeping the surname intact. Race is not something that can be washed out with soap water. Anyway, I was beaten up in that meeting. It was written in our destiny. Coming so far with so much effort, we never thought of going back.

Q : After you came back, was there any existence of your committee?

R : Our existence was destroyed. To run a party or a committee, you need to have money. If you have a family whose members are starving, if your wife and child are crying helplessly out of hunger and poverty, how can you prioritize the party over your family? This was the reason behind the party's eventual dissolution. Satish Da and Arabinda Da had left, I don't know where. I stayed in Kolkata and tried to fix the disputes within the organization. I had Rangalal Goldar, Sukumar and 20-30 young boys with me who assisted me in the process. You know Swapan Deb from the Forward Block, right? And Gobinda Basu? He was Swapan's elder brother. Gobinda used to run a party. He used to come frequently to my house. It was a kind of storeroom. He offered me a room to stay in exchange for joining his party. He even showed me a room in Madhyamgram. I asked him, "What will be my job?" He said, "When I will be in need of more people, you should take them to my party." I didn't accept the offer. Many such offers kept coming but I didn't pay heed to them. Finally, one night, we were able to occupy the river bar located in Canning. Almost 400-500 families were there. Rangalal, Sukumar, Fanibhushan, I and many others were together in the mission. I can't remember all the names properly. So many days have passed after that! We searched for Arabinda Mistry but he was nowhere to be found. Probably he was in Ultadanga working as a pushcart puller. We worked according to the situation. Do you onder? I used to be in contact with Ram Da. When we took shelter in the river bar at Canning, we had a talk with a few leaders. They said if I was able to spend two days there, I would be given the entire river bar. But, all the adjacent villages were populated by muslim people except for one. When they came to know about our presence, they immediately took the matter to Pramod Dasgupta with a written application. This happened 6 months after the Marichjhapi massacre. Having no other option, we had to shift to Jharkhali from Canning. We never faced any form of attack at Jharkhali. When we occupied the river bar in Canning, I had the support of Subrata Chatterjee who was present there himself. Once again, a warrant was issued against my name. I was not not able to enter the area. Police drove away everyone from there. I took them to Jharkhali. Despite my desperate attempts, I couldn't manage to form an organisation again. Money is needed for that! I was in touch with Rangalal Goldar, Niranjana Tarafder, Bimal, Sukumar and Fanibhushan. Niranjana Tarafder stays in Barasat. Bimal lives in Duttapukur. And, Rangalal Goldar has been living in Darga, a place located just before Canning, with 10 other families since then.

Q. A few questions have arisen from our discussion. During 78-79, all of you had planned to form an autonomous zone for the refugees. How did that thought occur?

R : Firstly, when the government gave us the land to stay, we set up a school, factory, food production unit, hospital, boat, furniture factory and market for our survival. The area had a vast sea on one side and on the other side, towards Kolkata, there is a big river on the left, straight ahead there is Kumirmari, on the right there is Mollakhali and a mighty river adjacent to Satjelia island. As civilized humans we had to arrange for medical facilities in such a large area because the awakening power within us prompted us to look after our foremost priority. We even had doctors within our community. Manoranjan Adhikari was an MBBS. Samir Samaddar was also there. I have forgotten the names. I had a list of their names. Even our own boys became teachers. We did not need anyone from outside to do the job. Not only doctors, bread and biscuit factories, markets, everywhere we had our own people. But we needed a huge amount of money for that! Those who had money, contributed.

Q : Now my question is, if you had money to set up a bakery and do business, then why did you choose Marichjhapi, why not any other place? You could have built the factory in Mana camp itself.

R : Now see, Mana is adjacent to Raipur. Isn't there a bakery in Raipur? But there was no bakery here. On top of that, we did not form a huge factory. A small amount of products were produced here and were supplied to the villages like Kumirmari, Mollakhali, Satjelia, Durgachar etc. When the business started doing well, we were struck by misfortune. We wanted to establish a school and a college there. Infact, we had already set up a school. We never had any unscrupulous intention. We never wanted to engage in any dispute with the government. Nothing of that sort! We had to bear the brunt of this misconception. What did we need to survive in the primary stage? If you visit the camps, you will find a doctor in every camp, be it a quack or an M.B.B.S. They are doing treatment in the villages. Homoeopathy, allopathy or ayurvedic - all forms of treatment are going on varying from place to place. There is no such thing which the refugees do not possess. That's why they have become refugees.

Interview : May 27, 2006.

High Court is in the Heart of Kolkata Jyoti Babu's men were deployed there

Pabitrakumar Biswas

[He was a youth refugee leader in Marichjhapi. He had a lot of hope in his heart for Marichjhapi. After his dream shattered, he did not go back to Marichjhapi. He didn't take any such opportunity and chose to live in the railway shanties. He works as a mason, but it doesn't provide him with sustenance all the time.]

Q : When everyone was coming to Marichjhapi, how were you associated with the event?

Pabitra : In 1965, when a hindu-muslim riot took place in East Bengal, I moved out from there.

Q : Where would you stay during that time?

P : I used to stay in Mana Camp.

Q : Where did you live in East Pakistan?

P : In Faridpur's Balagari village.

Q : How old were you back then?

P : Around 14. From there, first we went to Dhulandhar Camp, in Mandara village, MP. There, I applied for studies in Kurud camp and finally got admission in a school at Mana Transit Center. I was in Mana camp for 10 years.

It used to be called a group of transit camps. The government allocated 10 and a half rupees per family which could reach up to 78 rupees at the most.

Dandakaranya Development Project was formed. Everyone was taken to the forest to cut down trees and to construct roads. During that time, dole-giving used to be suspended. We were taken back from the forest in due time. The whole system was not anything that could be called rehabilitation. Previously, multitudes of refugees who migrated during the India-Pakistan partition were kept in certain villages. But they could not manage to stay there and left. Their abandoned villages were turned into our shelter.

Q : What was the reason behind their not being able to stay there?

P : In the hilly area, water does not stand on the laterite soil. So we had to depend on the monsoon. But the problem was that as it rained in the monsoon, the water would flow down the hill and stand in the lower slopes where the Adivasis used to live. In the local language, they were called Munda. We were kept in a place adjacent to them but it was on the higher slopes of the hill. The place was full of trees. Now the problem was to decide whether to cut down the forest and make agricultural lands or to secure water by felling the trees. Cows were not available. The land was also not fit for ploughing. On top of that, we had to survive on that meagre amount of money. So, what should they do? Having starved for days, they were, in a way, compelled to leave the place and come here.

Q : Did any leader from West Bengal pay you a visit? Did they promise you that you would be given shelter or provided with rehabilitation here, in West Bengal? Was there any such meeting held?

P : Yes. I am coming to that. Ram Chatterjee was one of the prominent leaders of West Bengal. He has passed away. His wife, Shanti Devi is still alive. Ram Babu communicated with us a number of times. Our present Minister of Fisheries Kiranmoy Dutta also communicated with us on many occasions and paid multiple visits to our camp.

Q : What did he say?

P : Give me some time. It is difficult for me to speak at length. He sat in a meeting with us in almost all the camps of Mana Transit and in all those places where we were rehabilitated. In those days, they were not in the government. Sidhartha Sankar Ray was the chief minister of West Bengal. These leaders promised loud and clear that 5 crores Bengalis were waiting to welcome us with extended arms. They prompted us to shift to West Bengal. They said that if we continued to stay here, we would be starved to death and our children would be sold etc. The latter chief minister Jyoti Basu called us to the steel plant in Villa. In the meeting, he said, "Alright. All of you should come over."

Q : Did he ask you to come over to Marichjhapi? How did that idea occur to you?

P : Kiranmoy Babu and Ram Babu told us that there are islands like Kumirmari and Mollakhali in the Sundarbans. The area was basically a forestland. They told

us to come over and see if we could set up our habitation there. Following this, a team of 7 people came here to visit the spot. I was one of them.

Q : Who were those people in that team of 7 members?

P : Sadhan Biswas, Pabitra Biswas - that is me, Raiharan Barei, Rambabu appointed a person and there was a journalist.

Q : Do you remember the name of that person who was appointed by Ram Babu?

P : He was Kiran Mondal, a resident of Chandannagar.

Q : And the name of the journalist? Which newspaper was he in?

P : I can't remember his name but he was a journalist from Yugantar.

Q : Jyotirmoy Dutta?

P : No. Jyotirmoy Da went next time. Not once, he went for 2-3 occasions.

Q : Do you remember the date and the year!

P : No, that I can't remember. Then we went away from there. Having reached Marichjhapi we decided that we would be able to survive in that place. But, water was a major crisis there. We tested the water also. Many people said that people coming from Faridpur won't survive here because they are accustomed to drinking sweetwater. But people from Khulna already know how to survive in saltwater. It won't be a problem for them. So, we took help from RSS to examine the water. They helped us with food and water pipes. We examined the water and found out that the quality of water is much better than it is in any other place within that boundary. It was even better than Dumdum, where we are sitting now.

Q : How did you arrive here?

P : We took a launch from Hasnabad.

Q : Did the people of Kumirmari help you when you first arrived there?

P : First, we contacted Pradip Biswas, a teacher of Kumirmari High School which probably has become a college now. Mr. Biswas was a gentleman. He was from RSP. He helped us in all ways possible. He is older than me. I asked him, "Pradip da, we have arrived. What do you think?" Pradip Da said, "If you think this place is

worthy of living, bring everyone else here." Then we met Mondal Babu (Prafulla Mondal) and told him, "Brother, we want to stay here. We need your help." He also said the same thing as Pradip Da, "If you think you'd survive, come." We got out of the place and decided over a discussion that we would bring everyone here. We didn't want those people to rehabilitate here who have been provided money by the central government. Despite giving repeated intimation to the central government and organising dharna in front of the office of R.K.Khalidkar, the central Rehabilitation minister, we landed in such a dispute. I had gone to Delhi. There was nothing but fake promises from the government. Nothing changed. Then, we decided to sit for a hunger strike.

Q : Where did you do that?

P : In Mana camp. After 8 long days.....

Q : Can you name those people who participated in the hunger strike?

P : I was not participating in the strike. Uncle, Satish Mondal, Arabinda Babu and 7-8 others were fasting, sitting side by side. We were continuously trying to communicate with Delhi almost every hour. Then, one day, the Vice-president and Venkatramaiya came to Mana camp. Colonel Shantiprasad Nandi was in charge of the camp back then. Now he lives in Jadavpur. I don't know if he is alive.

Khalidkar also came with Venkatramaiya. Jambuban Rao Dhote, an MP from Maharashtra who held a post in the government, came to the camp and gave us promises. We showed him a proper plan of providing rehabilitation, increasing the wage, giving proper shelter to the refugees and not playing with their fate, planning and distributing the lands among them etc. Having seen all this, he said, "Okay, this is perfect. You guys withdraw the strike. I will go to Delhi from here. I am accepting your demands except for two or three but I will consider them later on." He declared it in front of us. The strike had already reached its height by that time. There was nobody who could stop us. Siddhartha Sankar Ray was in power during that time. To put pressure on him, we gave repeated intimations. We set out for West Bengal once. But Sidhdhartha Shankar Ray did not let us enter. We were detained in Kharagpur. Some people were able to reach Maidan, but they were thrown away. We realized that this was not the right way. Everyone should come unitedly at a time. After going back, a year passed without any significant progress. Visit to Delhi was also postponed. The government was strictly against our demands. So, we decided to raise our voice once again. We had already known

where to get water from. We were also hopeful about the assistance we were promised to get. So, we unitedly decided to set out.

Q : Ten crores of hands in Bengal....

P : Ten crores of hands! People of West Bengal are waiting for you to come. It was said by Kiranmoy Chandra, who is now farming prawns on the embankment set by us.

Q : How many days after you arrived the torture started? You had already set up a school, shops and started farming fish by then, right?

P : I don't remember the date. The year was '78. All the people didn't arrive on the same day, they were coming scattered in groups. They took shelter on the roads, here and there. Jyoti Basu had already become the Chief Minister. People started coming in huge numbers. Jyoti Basu didn't have any idea that Satish Mondal could be instrumental in sending so many people to West Bengal. Mondal might not be educated, but he was honest and intelligent. He didn't know how to sign his name. I made him sign his name properly. Raiharan Babu was also a very intelligent man. He was the secretary of Dhaka Scheduled Caste Society. He never had a shortage of money there. My father-in-law was also a financially solvent person. But I came here alone with my family. So, I faced a financial crisis. When we couldn't enter Marichjhapi last time, we somehow managed to keep Satish Mondal in hiding at Marichjhapi. Prior to that, the organizations like Bharat Sebashram Sangha and Ramakrishna Mission started providing us with atta, milk, loaf etc. in Hasnabad. We got united on this side of Hasnabad. We were doubtful about the fate of these people who had already taken shelter on this side. We didn't want them to be harmed. But they were thrown away. We were forced to shift to the other side of Hasnabad. In the meantime, Ram Babu sat in a meeting with us. His attitude was different this time, maybe because he got thrashed by Jyoti Basu. He told us, "Brothers, please do not enter Marichjhapi." Raiharan da told him, "But we have nowhere to return to." On many previous occasions, we spent the night at his place, escaped with him. But now, in fear of being arrested, he was not doing anything. The tone has changed. We told him, "It's impossible to return now. These huge waves of people cannot be stopped." The communication among different camps had been disrupted. But we have already started to communicate with the camps of Madhya Pradesh. We told Ram Da, "This huge stream of people cannot be stopped." People had already started intruding by then. We requested those people in Hasnabad who deal in woods from Sundarban, "Brother, give us the boats. We

will give you some money." But the party had already sent a message to them, "Do not give the boats, because we will snatch them from you."

Q : Which party? C.P.I.M?

P : The royal party told them not to give us the boats. We said, "If you don't give us the boats, we will snatch them from you anyway. Give us the board without any dispute, we will definitely return them to you. If you try to stop us, we will pick up a fight." Then they said, "Okay. Take them." First, we did not enter Marichjhapi. We got into Kumirmari, on the other side of Mollakhali. I went first because there was none to lead them. The first obstruction from police came in Khulna's Betai. The name of the inspector was Subhas, but I do not remember the surname. He is still alive. He was the first to fire gunshots.

Q : This is also there in the book. Was he the officer-in-charge?

P : Hasnabad - Sandeshkhali - Gosaba - O.C.s of this area come very often.

After the initial two days, we halted in Kumirmari for a week. Raiharan Barei had already reached there. Before that, I had also visited the place. I had Rangalal Goldar with me. He was suffering from physical deformity. I took him with me for his suggestions and advice. He was a very knowledgeable person. I asked him what we should do now. He said, "Why did you settle in Kumirmari? The local people can be offended."

I asked him what could be done. He suggested we should go to the other side. We did the same the next day. There was no looking back. Reaching the other side, our main concern was to arrange for water. I don't know if you are aware of this or not, I have never got such sweet water anywhere in West Bengal. There, we gradually started building a school. We had educated boys amongst us.

Q : Do you remember any name?

P : R.N.Biswas, Nilunath Halder, Sunil Halder. Then we set up a hall room library for those who are fond of reading. We managed to collect some books. Our next concern was to plan a source of income to continue the expenditures of the school. So, we curated a field. Now, we needed a P.T. teacher. While staying in Mana camp, all of us used to do physical training. Those who had studied in schools and colleges, have participated in the NCC. We selected those boys who already knew P.T. Since we were aware of the fact that earning is of foremost importance, we asked them to go to the cities. We promised them to supply their family with the money we could manage to earn from here. But at that point the most important

thing was to earn more money for running the whole system. So, we decided to sell out the roots of old trees in the city and earn some money. This is how we planned to continue sustaining.

Q : Did you catch fish?

P : Yes. Just like people who commute to the cities know the necessity of a cycle, people from East Bengal have the same for a boat. So, we started making boats. We knew if we could get these things going, we would manage to survive. And, if you can't do anything else, at least catch fish. They asked, "But how would we sell them?" We said, "You need to make boats for that."

Q : How many boats did you make?

P : Almost a thousand. Then we used to gather all the fish we caught in one place. Since everyone could not go to the market, we used to sell them at a wholesale rate.

Q : Did you sell those fish in Kumirmari?

P : No, we didn't sell them in Kumirmari, rather we would go to Betai, Khulna where there is Mankata. People used to wait over there for us. They would weigh the fish and buy them at a wholesale rate. We were spared from running here and there. On the other hand, We were falsely accused of cutting down trees in the Sunderbans. Jyoti Basu, who never set foot in the Sunderbans, was instrumental in spreading this false rumour. Infact, we forbade everyone to put their hands on the trees. We are not denying that a few trees were harmed. But that is all. Thousands of people settled down here under such adverse conditions. We constantly requested Jyoti Basu to look after our matter but he was adamant, "I will never sit for any discussion with you." In the meantime, a series of incidents were happening. They seized our boat named 'Debjani'. That was a public launch, not a governmental one. Along with 'Ma Manasa', the government seized all the launches that were there inside that boundary. Oh! I am shifting my focus. We went on with our demonstrations in Delhi. During that time, Morarji Deshai's party and Janata Party were in power at the center. CPI(M) won 36 seats to retain their position in the parliament. Oh, I've forgotten to mention one thing. We got huge support and sympathy from the people of Satjelia, Mollakhali.

Q : Can you name a few? You've mentioned some from Kumirmari.

P : To be honest, I was in the action squad. So it was difficult for me to interact with people. That's why I didn't have much public interaction. I would only discuss with my own men. Most of the time, I was out earning money.

Now, the members of Sansadiya Tadanta Committee visited Marichjhapi and they said the area was suitable for living. Delhi said that the island was under the control of the state government. But we were giving intimations in Delhi, so we could fathom how their report would be. In the meantime, Jyoti Basu had reached there. He had sleepless nights! Being a people's leader, how could he sleep peacefully! He was afraid to lose his power. Adun Souri used to write a lot, too.

Suddenly, something happened because of which all the write-ups came to a stop in Yugantar. What followed was only deprivation. Jiban da was forced to shut down the paper. Jyotirmoy Dutta was a man with refined tastes. He had built a hotel inside a boat. These days, he doesn't involve himself in anything. I went to Rishra only once. He told me, 'You know Pabitra, politics is a very dirty thing. I don't like it anymore. If my wife had not been a servicewoman, we would not have survived. One of my daughters has gone to London to pursue journalism. The Human Rights Commission was supposed to come here but they were not allowed to. What could Tarakunde possibly do? The commission was bought off overnight. Jyoti Basu visited Tarakunde's house. Tarakunde had nothing to do. Everything changed in a flash.

Q : Did Tarakunde write a letter to Niranjana Halder?

P : Yes, he did. Niranjana Babu expressed his grief, saying, 'I don't know what to do!' His brain was not working properly. The members went back just then. We realised that we would not be able to survive at Marichjhapi anymore. We were clueless. The police department barricaded the island so that the food supply could be stopped. Meanwhile, the High Court had issued an injunction. Their verdict stated, "You can not stop food and water supply in this manner." But the High Court is in the heart of Kolkata. In Marichjhapi there was no court. Jyoti Basu's henchmen took charge of the area. To reach a nearby forest we had to cross a certain distance. Police started patrolling the area. They set their camp on the side of Kumirmari. We sat on this side, helpless. Even if we could salvage some water,

there was no way to secure any food. How long can you play hide and seek with these people! The launch named Debjani which had the prime role to play in securing our supplies, was set to capsize. They did the same with other boats as well. Now, none of us had necessary monetary resources. Even the ornaments of our wives were all sold out. We had no food supply. On top of that, we were unable to do our nighttime operations to secure food. The way through the river was clearly visible as it was a small river. There was no truck. So, to carry the food sacks, we had to use the way through the river. Being utterly helpless, we took a different path. We gave an intimation in Sandeshkhali Police Station at Gosaba. We said, "Please do not capsize our boats and free the boats you have already seized." But they didn't listen to us. Then we said, "We are coming with the boats. Please save us." They didn't do anything. On the other side of the police station, 2-3 policemen were standing with their rifles.

Q : Did they appoint hired henchmen from Kumirmari and Mollakhali?

P : Not at that time. When we reached there, the officer said, "Look brother, what can we do? We have the order." I don't know if he said this out of fear or anything. We were huge in number. If they had wanted to escape, we would attack them. Our main purpose was to convince the government to have a talk with us, but they were not doing that. He said, "I don't have a wireless with me. How can I connect the call?" We replied, "How can we accept that you don't have a wireless?" He told us to take back those boats with us. We had no option but to bring along those 50-60 dilapidated boats. These incidents happened in the first phase. This was followed by the food crisis. We cut off some wood from the Goran tree and said, "Let's barge in the Writer's." You might have seen that there is a canal which runs through Baguihati. We decided to take that route and go as far as we could. This time, we were halted at Sandeshkhali. The intimation had been issued from here. And, this became a bloody encounter. Tear gas was charged at us. It was an uneven battle because we had no weapons. But we put up a strong resistance against the police until the party cadres took charge. The party started taking actions. General public realised that this action was being carried out according to the plan of the government. From then on, we began to lose our mental strength. Having received merciless beating, we got back to Marichjhapi. But the food crisis remained the same. We noticed that some people were already feeling exhausted. To quench their hunger, they boiled the tender leaves of coconut trees and ate it. These are all

true stories. Starving people were trying to survive on these foods. If my wife had been there, it would have been of some help. The spinach was inedible, still they boiled and ate it to fill their stomach. Even under such conditions, we were not ready to give up. Then one day we saw the cadres campaigning that Jyoti Basu had announced a meeting with the people of Kultali, Gosaba and Mollakhali. We were on this side of the river and they were on the other. Sitting in the launch, Jyoti Basu was giving his speech on the mic, "These people are cutting down the forest and causing harm to you. These resources were supposed to be yours. They've come from outside and are taking away all the fish from the river. If they had not encroached, it would have been yours." When Jyoti Basu had left after giving his speech, his comrades from the party got the license to act. Previously, we were instructed to settle down in the forestland we had cleared with immense toil. But there were no Sundari trees in that area. Some other species of mangroves were available but they were very few in number. Even after all of this happened, people didn't look down upon us. They would not behave badly with us when we visited their area. They have even helped us with food. I think still today their hearts weep for us. They never wanted us to face this crisis. However, one fine morning, the action started. We had already been barricaded and were not allowed to step outside the island. Nilkamal was the district magistrate.....

Q : Nirad Das was there.....

P : That was the time for action. Kalyan Chakraborty was the chief of the Tiger Project. After losing his job, he had to beg for this post. Then he was called upon again. I don't know if he was appointed to do this particular work. He never did a single good thing. However, it was action time. B.S.F entered the scene with a battleship. Even after all this, the refugees were undaunted not to give up. So, Jyoti Basu sent Ram Babu as a messenger. Previously, when he was at the launch, he called random people and asked, "Did I ask you to come to Marichjhapi?" So, look what he was trying to do. He was trying to make us confess that we wanted to come to Marichjhapi. Everyone said, "Indeed, we wanted to come here." But the newspaper reported the exact opposite thing. He was deliberately trying to strike a discordance. Goldar Babu (Rangalal Goldar) was present there at that time. So I went there. Seeing our boys Ram Babu invited us in. I asked him to come down. He said in reply, "I don't have much time in hand. While roaming about I happened to come by in Sunderban." Amidst so much pressure, he still had the time to pay us

a visit. He called us to say, "Come on in. Have tea at the launch." Our boys are simple-minded. They went in without a hesitation. Inside, they were treated with a filling meal like mutton and stuff. I didn't go inside. Since I was the one to give the command, I became curious about what was happening inside. Meanwhile, Ram Babu had sent a glass of wood apple sherbet for Goldar. Do you understand? When I asked, "Where are you taking the Sherbet? To Goldar?" They were feeding our starving boys with rice and mutton. There was plenty of food. Ram Babu had many courtiers in the ministry. In the meantime, I went inside. Seeing me, Ram Da asked me to stop. He would generally address me very informally. He asked, "Why are you getting down again?" Having said, "Did you do it right, Ram Da?" I quickened my steps. I think he planned all of it. I told you about Pradip Babu, right? He had no chair-table in his school. He said, "Pabitra, make me some chairs and tables. I don't have any in my school." I assured him saying, "Don't worry, Dada. I will make them for you." I made some chairs and tables for the school. I took the minimum payment for that because I had to pay wages to my boys. Right after the chairs and tables were made, their evacuation operation started. If you go to Kumirmari you would find those chairs and tables are still there because the wood they are made of will not easily be destroyed. Let me take some breath, I will tell you more.

Q : And then what happened?

P : After this, the Police set up their camp on the bank of the river in Kumirmari. Adjacent to the area, there is a police station belonging to the Gosaba forest department. There, they set up a make-shift police camp loaded with weapons. They were given instructions that no one should enter or exit the island. It was a total blockade. On the other side, the other action group was instructed to patrol the area by water sitting in the launch. They would vigil us through all day and night. The situation went to such an extent that people staying in Marichjhapi went out of food stock - there was no rice, no wheat, no nothing. It was getting impossible to control our people. People on both sides were crying and screaming out of utter helplessness. Then, one day, out of sheer desperation, we decided to break the barricade. We managed to get hold of a microphone. Now we needed boats to ferry the river. Earlier, we'd brought boats from Hasnabad. They did not want to take any money from us. But in the end, they agreed to take some and we gave them as much money as we could afford.

Now, when the girls ferried to the other side, they were not allowed to enter. On top of that, they got beaten up. But, these people, driven by hunger, forcibly entered the island. We were afraid that the boys might attack the police camp, so we gave clear instructions against that. But, how ruthlessly they were suppressed with bullets for one and a half hours non-stop. Later, ferrying through the river became a little easier, but not beyond that. But, bullets continued to be fired across the river. An elderly woman of Kumirmari, aged 70/75, who was just sitting in her room, got hit by a bullet. After that, the police camp was extended. In newspapers and transistors, the news got circulated, "They have started to oppress the local people of Kumirmari" etc. etc. The situation escalated fast. I might have mentioned another thing earlier. Old age makes me forget a lot of things. During that time, Medinipur was hit by a flood. We were told if we would go and assist in the flood relief campaign, we would get monthly wages. We did not have any jobs at that time. So, they took 20/25 boys from us and thoroughly brainwashed them. They told the boys, "You go and say that you can't stay there. The government will not allow us to stay. You are wasting your time. You will die of hunger or disease. It's better if you try to convince 2-4 people at a time and get them out of there. After that, you will get jobs, earn money. Now, take the money and go."

Q : Who all did this?

P : Who else but the Left-front government. It is evident that the money was sent by the party. There was a sudden change in the attitude of the boys after that. They started spending money carelessly. We asked them, "Why are you saying all this? It's good that you've got the money. But you are not supposed to get it." Then we realised that they had brainwashed all these 22 boys. As a consequence of that, 5 to 10 families began moving out from the island. We understood that it was not possible anymore to win the battle in a straight way. The ground underneath our floor was sliding away. One night, we called Raiharan Da and sat for a discussion. My father-in-law, Arabinda Babu and the other close members of the Samiti were present. Yet, we could not find a way out about whom to go next. However, people were continuously moving out. In the meanwhile, the government set up a microphone on the other side of the river which announced, "Why are you starving to death? There are plenty of fish, meat and other foods on this side. Go back to Dandakaranya. You will be provided with permanent shelters. The car is waiting

for you in Hasnabad. Hurry up." As days passed, the Samiti started losing its effectiveness. We had no food in store. Children were starving. How could we manage all of this? There was no way we could secure some food for them. The situation got more and more intense. And then, one fine morning, thousands of cadres entered our area as the police stood and watched. The shanties were set on fire and the school building with all the photographs was destroyed. This was the end of Marichjhapi.

Q : Some cadres from Kumirmari were there....

P : Yes. There was a boy named Amal who had a tea stall near Kumirmari market. He was a student of Pradip Babu. But in that situation, he didn't even spare his teacher. We were the target. So, we had to go underground. Throughout that period, they didn't allow Kashinath Babu to enter. If he were there, we could have got some advice. But he was arrested. So, we didn't have a single one to consult on what to do next. We had no clue where to go from there.

Q : The torture inflicted upon women by the police....

P : Indeed, they tortured women. Women were captured, forcefully taken to the jungles; even when they went to fetch water, the police tortured them.

Q : How did police get involved in this?

P : So, the police entered the area on the 1st. Since there were tigers, bears and other animals, according to the government directives, people are appointed to look after them. But, we had been staying there so long alongside these wild animals. They didn't harm us in any way. But as the policemen entered, our life became difficult. Not only them, they set up a camp there. All this happened before the firing event took place. We knew that they would keep track of our activities. But we were not much bothered since we thought it was good to have the conversation going. As long as they stayed there, they didn't hassle the girls. But while the girls went out to fetch water or cow-dung on the road, they were tortured. There were so many unfamiliar people. Although we knew a few people from before, it was impossible to know all of them who were there. Only when a report was issued, we got to know them. Raiharan Babu mentioned all this in his report. But these reports didn't make it to the news. We have heard that several reports have been made, but in reality, most of them didn't happen.

Q : But how did you arrive?

P : Dada, I've already told you that I am not that kind of a guy. I stayed in someone else's house. There was a man whose surname was Saha. He was a wood smuggler in Sundarban. So, he knew the roads of the area like his fingernails. When we first entered the area, we took help from these people who had a fair idea about the place. From the moment I set foot in Sunderban, Saha Da was a constant companion. There was no politics involved. Saha Da helped me in the matters of collecting information and getting contacts of important people. He was born in Satjelia, on the bank of this river. He used to stay in my place all the time. When I realised I had nothing else to do, I told him, "Saha Da, what should I do now? Should I surrender?" Saha Da replied, "But if you surrender, you won't exist anymore. Come with me." With him I started walking barefoot through the forest of Sundarban. Having crossed Marichjhapi, we reached the second island. He knew every nook and cranny of the place. When he came into our contact, he stopped smuggling. I said to him, "As long as we are here in Marichjhapi, we would arrange for your sustenance. You need not smuggle anymore. Your only job will be to give us contacts. We are taking all the responsibilities of your family. Whichever way possible, we will take care of their needs." Now, with his help I travelled a long way through the woods. Suddenly, he gave a call. We had reached near his house. In that locality, people were familiar with him. But they didn't respond to the call. At that time, some people from the village were carrying a dead pig in their boat. Seeing me, they asked, "Dada, what are you doing here?" I said, "Brother, help me cross the river in your boat." So, they picked me up in their boat and took me along. Following Saha Da's instructions, as we reached a place free from the fear of police, we got down from the boat. After that, we took shelter in Saha Da's place for some days and didn't go out.

Q : Then, Raiharan Da moved out.....

P : Yes. I told him earlier, "Dada, you step out of this. At this age, you won't be able to move so frequently." So, I got him out a few days back.

Q : Arabinda Mistry also moved out earlier?

P : Yes. He was a timid kind of a person. I told him, "Dada, it's better if you go out now." I saw him off earlier. When there was no police, it was unnecessary to stay.

Now listen to my story. At that point, I could neither go back to Dandakaranya, nor stay in West Bengal. Because, in that area people were scattered all over. As I had wondered with these people earlier, they knew me very well. I thought that it was not possible for me to stay there any longer. On the other hand, if I had gone to Dandakaranya and become a part of the project, it would also be a problem. Those who had already reached there would raise questions against me, "Where is your Ram Babu? Where is Kiranmoy Nanda? Why are you showing your face again?" People would say a lot of things against me. They would let out the devastation of losing their loved ones. So, I didn't go there. I went straight to U.P. Having got out of here, I bought a train ticket. But I had no idea where I was going. From here I went to Nagpur, then to Madras and finally to Karnataka's Bangalore. In Bangalore, I spent one day. I had my nephew there who was doing his training in the Air Force. I thought let's give it a try and check out the situation there. But he was just doing his training and not a service. So, I could not stop there. Instead, I went to Bijaywara which is a big city of Andhra Pradesh; from Bijaywara to Visakhapatnam and then to Malkangiri via Koraput. Even Malkangiri did not feel like a suitable place to live in. So, I returned to Rampur district in Uttar Pradesh. People who went there got proper rehabilitation, found work in the lands of Hindustanis. I was familiar with those people from the time I was underground. Since then, a long time has passed. Jyoti Basu won the election and was enjoying his power. I didn't go to Mana. It would have been difficult for me if I went there. Because, I'd lost my field there and those who studied, became barristers or magistrates. I realized, even if I go there I won't get my position back. So, I stayed in Rampur and started doing my work. Prankrishna Chakraborty was the President of UCRC.. Dr. Amal Chandra Sen was there too. He had his office there. And he used to stay in a slum near Tala at that time. Dr. Sen introduced himself to me. During the British era, he was in Andaman Cellular Jail and after independence as the refugee crisis grew and UCRC was formed, he became a member of it. UCRC was still very much active. We denied that in Hasnabad when Homeguard Ram Chatterjee and his representatives wanted us to join hands with them. But we realised that there would be a problem on an international level if we did so and the purpose as well as the importance of our movement would go wasted. That's why we denied Ram Chatterjee. When we were in Marichjhapi, we met a person whom we addressed as Swamiji. He was associated with Bankim Chandra Pathbbaban,

located in Sealdah and did service works. He interacted with us with a lot of sympathy. His name was Dr. Samiran whom we used to call as Swamiji or Netaji. He used to do our treatment, give us medicine, read the letters we received and advised us what to reply. From time to time, he used to give us valuable suggestions. I'd forgotten to mention him as well.

Q : For how many days he was there?

P : From beginning to end. Since the tussle in Sandeshkhali, he stopped attending. I should mention one more thing which I'd forgotten the other day. He raised a question on DNKA which was Dandakaranya Development Authority under the central government. When the refugees from East Bengal first entered their zone, there was utter chaos. In various hilly areas, water crises are a common thing. These refugees were thrown into Dandakaranya, a land of deserts and rocky forest, where there was no supply of water. These people coming from East Bengal were accustomed to a different natural surrounding with abundance of air and water. In Dandakaranya, there was not even any trace of water. Later we understood that the government's purpose was to use these people for cutting down the forest and building roads. If anyone escaped, they would be captured and brought back to the camp again. So, this cycle from one camp to another continued for 10 years. The word 'rehabilitation' was never uttered by the government and no such arrangements were made. Then, the refugees were taken to a hilly area nearby. They were instructed to clean up the land and in exchange of that they would be provided with a dole. This was a government grant worth rupees 65 per month where you could get rice and other essential food items. The second concern was there was no market nearby as well as no transportation within 300-400 kilometres. The area was absolutely inaccessible. The lands they were given were not suitable for agriculture at all. The meager amount of land which had living conditions was occupied by the Adivasis. The Dandakaranya Development Authority allocated a budget for installing irrigation systems in the lands of the refugees. So, now the authority of this project was handed over to the state department. The Dandakaranya Authority comprises a number of areas from Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and some other states. The central government funded this project for the refugees. Saibal Gupta was the director and a lot depended on his actions. But he was not allowed to do his work properly. Being dejected, he resigned from his post. We heard him saying that the way those dams

were being erected and the process in which the water was being supplied to the lands, there is no way that the Bengalis would be benefitted by this. And that is exactly what happened. For example, Satigura dam was located very close to Malkangiri which was not even a town. It was like a village market area. Through a narrow forest in Koraput, in between two hills a canal was constructed. I worked on that site too. I was there for some days, for what reason I won't tell you. The water carried through the dam never reached the lands inhabited by the Bengalis. There was no passage for the water to flow. Rather, the water flowed through the Adivasi occupied lands. Even if the water reached the lands of Bengalis in some areas, there was no position to hold the water and so it got wasted. Therefore, among 90 families that went there to find shelter, only a few left as the number of people kept getting lesser and lesser with days. Those who survived had to bear with extreme hardships. In addition to that, they were being constantly instigated by the words of hope from the mouths of the politicians. So, these helpless people had no choice but to jump automatically into the waves of unforeseen future. I couldn't explain these things well enough that day. I think the government of West Bengal does not care in the slightest if these people have gone back to Dandakaranya from Marichjhapi or not. It has been noticed that a few people have gone back to Dandakaranya, others got mixed into the crowd of people in West Bengal. Thousands of people are living in the slums around the rail tracks throughout the city.

Q : Besides which rail tracks are they living?

P : Certainly in Bongaon, Duttapurkur, Bamungachi. Name a rail station where they are not staying! They are everywhere. Two days back, I read in the newspaper that there was an uproar in one of the slums of Marichjhapi. Adjacent to Dumdum station, there is Marichjhapi colony. In this way, the people of Marichjhapi are scattered all over the state. The central and the state government might have claimed certain things, they might also be delighted with their achievement of evacuating these people, but the fact is that 90 percent of the people who'd come from Dandakaranya are still in West Bengal. The number of people who moved elsewhere is not more than 10 or so. You had asked me about this the last day but I couldn't answer you properly.

Q : Can you think of any other incident like this?

P : There are many such incidents like this but it would not be appropriate for me to pronounce them.

Interview : 7th March, 2006
19th March, 2006

The Initiation of Attack

Prasanta Halder

[Prashanta Halder was the President of Sunderban Launch Union. He was closely connected with the refugee leaders of Marichjhapi]

Q : When the refugees migrated to Marichjhapi, were you a member of the Communist Party?

Prasanta Halder : When they first came to Marichjhapi, I had a close connection with them. Rangalal Goldar, Raiharan Barei and Satish Mondal were amongst their leaders. I was the secretary of the launch union back then. One day, Satish Babu told me, "We are running out of funds. Would you be able to arrange two free passes for two of our volunteers?" The owners did not need any pass. That's why we arranged for free passes for the two volunteers. One launch ran from Canning to Gosaba and the other from Marichjhapi to Hasnabad. They could travel in any of the two free of cost. I used to go to Marichjhapi. There were 3 primary schools and one junior high school in that area. I suggested setting up 2 more primary schools there. In reply, Satish Babu asked, "And books?" I said I would arrange for the books. I had a bookstore back then. So, I sent a bundle of old edition books which were rejected by the publishers. Exactly after seven days, C.I. issued a notice saying, although I've forgotten the date, it went like this - "On such and such day there will be no launch service." Gangadhar Bhattacharya, who was later murdered in Tiljala, was the C.I. He was in charge of the proceedings. We rushed to him. I asked, "What will happen if the launch service is closed? So many people will come and wait on the bank of the river. What will you do with all these launches?" He replied, "I am not allowed to say anything. It's confidential." So, I said, "I won't let any launch go then. You might flex your power of law, but we would present

medical certificates whereby we the drivers and the boatswains would be reported as sick. And it's illegal to drive a launch without a driver or a boatswain. What would you do then?" He said, "We will gherao Marichjhapi and evict the refugees."

This happened during the night. A launch used to start at 4 in the morning. I sent a letter to Satish Da, writing, "From that day, you would be besieged and evicted. It's time for you to decide what strategy to devise."

Q : Tell me more about the letter you sent to Niranjana Halder.

P : In the 70s, when the refugees migrated to our land, I used to look after the proceedings. I would receive all the news regarding the exchange of letters, arriving of trains etc. Bhanu Sen, the leader of C.P.I.M from Dum Dum area was the Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation minister. We used to call him Bhanu Da. Via telephone he used to inform us everything about the arrival of refugees. I was the leader of a significant number of movements that happened during that time. Earlier, when I took part in a farmers' protest in Khulna, I became friends with the other communist party members. In this batch of migrants I found familiar faces and so there was an emotional connection. They were also looking for me as soon as they'd arrived. But I was not there. When I came back 7 days later, I saw that they had already crossed the river and reached Tengramari. I met them there and from then on, as long as they stayed there, I kept in touch regularly. But I couldn't stop the launches from being taken away from us. The launches were taken to Canning. There was a syndicate. When they besieged the area, they did not let anyone enter. In some launches, there was no driver or boatswain either. In a letter to Jyoti Basu I wrote, "What is happening here is against the international water regulation or our inland water regulation. You must take immediate action." I also mentioned the names of the boats where there was no driver or boatswain in the letter. Following that, a letter came from Jyoti Babu's department, saying, "I have received your letter. We will investigate." But once the eviction happened, there was no need for investigation. As the operation started and the refugees began to escape, their boats were hit in the middle and capsized. Some were killed getting hit by the fan blade and some managed to survive swimming across to the other side.

Q : Do you remember the name of the launch or the boatswain?

P.H. : It was not Younus. He disposed of the corpses at night.

Q : Tell me about what happened at night.

P.H. : There was one boatswain in the launch named Gangadhar who lives in Hasnabad now. If he could have been brought here, he would have given us more news. He was there during the operation. He might not remember all of it due to old age. As the launches went back, in the darkness of the night the dead bodies were thrown into Bay of Bengal. I've forgotten the name of the launch but the boatswain was Younus. He along with other boatswain mates reported to the union about the operation. There was a driver who capsized the boats of the refugees with a lot of enthusiasm. The C.I. of Hasnabad tempted him by saying if he accomplished this task successfully, he would be provided with a job in the police launch. But he never received his job. Probably he lives in Mumbai now.

Q : Tell me the name of the launch and the boatswain who damaged the boats.

P.H. : The driver's name was Sunil Das. I can't remember the name of the boat. But it was Sunil Das who damaged the maximum number of boats. C.I. Gangadhar Bhattacharya was there at his launch. He insisted, "Destroy them. After returning from here, you will be provided with a job in the police launch." Being tempted, Sunil did what he was told. Then, we brought him here and cornered him. The launches came back full. They said that the police did not agree to set the houses on fire. The cadres of C.P.I.M did that. A question came up in my mind and so, in a letter to Anandabazar Patrika I wrote, "Instead of belonging to the scheduled caste like Namashudra, Poundra Kshatriya, Rajbongshi, if these people were Kayastha, Bramhin or Baidya, would Jyoti Basu be able to inflict such tortures on them?" My write-up was also published later on. But by that time, the damage was already done. On a humorous note, when I came back, I said I would send a gammy to Marichjhapi. In their office, they had a good system. All of them came from Mana camp. Satish Babu was one-eyed, Rangalal was a hunchback and so all they needed was a lame person. Within 7 to 10 days after that, the operation took place and destroyed everything. I'd sent them books but to no avail. People residing in Marichjhapi had built up a wonderful living atmosphere for themselves. They set up embankments, boat-making factories and a neighborhood for potters. They used to vendor clay pots and pitchers in Sunderban and would get paddy in exchange for that. They also set up bidi factories and their 'Marichjhapi Bidi' became well

known in Sunderban. All their industries were self-sufficient. There was also a loaf factory. If they had been provided with that space, it would not harm anyone. But, Jyoti Babu and his men accused them of ruining the coconut seedlings. Renu Babu had curated a coconut forest. Not even one tree was harmed. When they were barricaded for 13 days and were left with no food or water, only then they started eating the tender leaves of coconut trees. I don't remember significant episodes as old age has reduced my memory. I often forget names of medicines, books etc. I haven't kept any documents of that time. I used to publish a magazine named 'Jalapath'. I had a huge bundle of that magazine stored in my house. But they got infected by termites, so I had to throw them away. The magazine ran for 50 years on a monthly basis. But I do not have a single copy left with me.

Q : It was towards the end of Marichjhapi that Younus brought the dead bodies here. Ross Mullick has mentioned in his book that there were no people on the south of Marichjhapi. How many dead bodies were disposed of there?

P.H. : We could not keep count of that. The boatswain said that many corpses were thrown into the Bay of Bengal at night. They were shot dead by the police. But the police didn't agree to set the houses on fire. That was done by the party cadres from Kumirmari and Jogeshganj.

Q : Do you remember anyone from Kumirmari?

P.H. : The problem is that none of my contemporaries are alive. When I got sick, I tried to contact various people but they were all dead by then. Half of my companions who were boatmen or boatswains are already dead and the other half of them are living elsewhere in places like Bombay, Madras, Goa. The launch service stopped here and so they moved out. But Horen Chatterjee from Hasnabad is still alive. He has come back from Assam and is currently staying here. If you find him at his home, you will get to know all the incidents that happened in the launch that day as he was present during the operation.

Interview : 31st December, 2006.

Where Will We Go

Surjakanta Bain

[It was promoted that "the refugees were convinced to go back to Dandakaranya and they did it volunteerily. What does Surjakanta Bain's experience tell us? He was not a leader, but a common refugee farmer]

Q : Your name?

Surjakanta Bain : Surjakanta Bain.

Q : What is the name of this village?

S.B. : MVP No. 29.

Q : Where in Bangladesh was your home?

S.B. : In Talbere Village, under Arshuni police station.

Q : From there, where did you arrive?

S.B. : To Hasnabad.

Q : Did you come directly to Hasnabad?

S.B. : From Hasnabad Camp we were taken to Duijure Camp in Bihar. Then, from Bihar we came to Manavata and finally to this camp. We stayed in camp no. 29.

From here, we went to Sundarban. When the massacre happened in Sundarban, we rushed to this place and finally got rehabilitation.

Q : How long did you stay in Sundarban?

S.B. : Until the last day.

Q : How was your experience in Sundarban? Why did you leave the place?

S.B. : Because, we were attacked and beaten up in the launch and were compelled to leave the place.

Q : Can you explain how you were beaten up?

S.B. : We were in Narkel Bagan at the time of attack and were forced to leave.

Q : Who beat you up?

S.B. : The police.

Q : And how?

S.B. : Police forced us to get into the launch. Some people were taken into custody. I was not in the lock-up. I came directly to Hasnabad, boarded a car and reached Malkangiri.

Q : Did anyone help you over there? Or you toiled hard to secure food?

S.B. : No one helped us. We had to work tirelessly to secure food. We survived on mere wheats and vegetables that grew on water. When the resources felt short, we

would come to Kumirmari for work. We stayed in the town for 15-16 days and then went back again.

Q : How much money did you earn from the work?

S.B. : The scope of work was very low. We hardly earned 7 rupees a day.

Q : What kind of work did you do?

S.B. : In the fields we would mow grass or maintain the ground.

Q : How many members were there in your family?

S.B. : Two. My wife and I.

Q : And what about water?

S.B. : We would bring salt water from Kumirmari. We had to carry water all the way.

Q : Did anyone prohibit you from taking water?

S.B. : We had to cross the river on a boat to reach Kumirmari. The water we brought from there was used in cooking and drinking.

Q : Why did you leave?

S.B. : Police beat us up and forced us to leave.

Q : Why did they beat you? To drive you away?

S.B. : Yes, to drive us away.

Interview : 23rd September, 2009.

We Won't Get Into the Launch

Narayan Mondal

[When you are afraid of death, these things don't really matter. It was a difficult task to take my mother, wife and children along. My mother was really old. We had 7 members in the family. In order to save all of them, we moved out.]

Q : Your name?

Narayan Mondal : Narayan Mondal.

Q : Where do you stay here?

N.M. : Earlier we were in Camp no 16 in Malkangiri. Afterwards, we were rehabilitated to M.V.P. 29. 73 families lived there. Among 73 families, 13 stayed here and the rest of us moved out. While going by train, the traveling ticket examiner abused us physically and threw away all our luggage. Cursing us he said,

"Go wherever you want, but don't come here. Go to Sunderban, don't dare come to this place ever." So, after spending 3 nights on the field under the open sky, Ramakrishna Mission issued us a card providing 1 kilo rice and 1 kilo atta for 7 days. But that was sufficient enough for our survival. So we headed towards Sunderban. Satish Mondal was our leader. Along with him, Rangalal Goldar and Shibu Goldar were there. We stayed in Kumirmari for a few days. Then we went to the "plantation" in Sundarban. Having gone there, we started setting up our houses. But there was tremendous scarcity of water. We took clay pots to fetch water but they were so fragile to carry. Then, Shibu Goldar of Kalimela told us, "You should start setting up embankments." We did so. It was almost 5 hands wide from top to bottom. Then we tied two ropes. He said, "You will get the money." We asked, "Who will give us money?" He replied, "The government will give you." But we never received any of that. 1 kilo rice and atta once a week helped us sustain. Police paid occasional visits to keep an eye on our actions. They roamed about the place in launches and never uttered a word. We sensed that something was not right. One day, 4-5 launches came loaded with tear gas and guns and ordered us, "Get into the launch." We said, "No. We won't get in. Where would you take us?" They replied, "We will take you to the lock-up." We asked, "But what is our crime?" They wanted to know, "Who had told you to come to Sundarban?" We said, "Satish Mondal was our leader. Ram Chatterjee was there too. We even held a meeting inside the forest." They sternly answered, "But you are not allowed to stay here. This is a governmental land. You would destroy all the coconut trees in the plantation." We were determined to give in. But when the police started firing, we took our belongings.....

Q : Do you remember about the firing?

N.M. : Yes. But we were not there!

Q : When they blockade the land from all sides....

N.M. : We would eat boiled spinach. But that was literally inedible. For some days, we survived on eating coconut flour or tender parts of palm trees. We had no other option!

Q : Do you know anyone who was shot?

N.M. : I personally don't know anyone. There were people from many places. So, it's difficult to recognise them.

Q : What was the reason behind your moving out from there?

N.M. : "Why have you come to Sundarban? Who has given you the right?" We used to feed on the forest resources. They charged us "Why are you destroying the forest? You can't stay here. Move out." We told them, "Sir! We have been staying here for 2 months. Where would we go now? Please let us settle down here so that we can build our shelter and stay." They said in reply, "No. That is not possible. It is a government area. You must evacuate." They forced us to leave and took away all our belongings. We had no option but to move out....

Q : What belongings did you have?

N.M. : Two sacks, two trunks, plates and bowls etc.

Q : Who took these things?

N.M. : Nobody took them away. We had to leave them behind. When you are afraid of death, these things don't really matter. It was a difficult task to take my mother, wife and children along. My mother was really old. We had 7 members in the family. In order to save all of them, we moved out.

Q : Do you remember any incident with the police? Can you tell me one or two incidents.

N.M. : I remember that very well. Initially, the police silently kept an eye on that area as they patrolled the river in launches. One day, they told us to get into the launch. We asked, "Why should we?" They replied, "You won't be allowed to stay here. You must go back from where you came." We protested, saying, "We won't go anywhere." They said, "This is a government area. You won't be allowed to stay here." Then, the policemen destroyed our houses. They had guns and lathis with them.

We Drove Everyone Away

Dinabandhu Mondal

[Dinabandhu Mondal was not a friend of the refugees, rather he was a bored goon of the police. In exchange of money, he destroyed the house of the refugees in Sunderban]

Q : Name of the village?

Dinabandhu : Kumirmari.

Q : How many years are you staying here?

D : Since my birth. I am 58 years old now.

Q : Is this area haunted by tigers?

D : Earlier, tigers would come. But nowadays they don't. The area is covered by rivers from all sides. So they can't enter.

Q : What is the name of the island on the other side?

D : That island is called Marichjhapi. That river on the other side is called Korankhali.

Q : Do people live in Marichjhapi?

D : Yes. There is an office. People from the forest live there.

Q : Is there a habitat?

D : No. Migrants from Bangladesh tried to settle down here but we had driven them away.

Q : Migrants? And you drove them away?

D : Yes. We drove them away. After that, police came and started torturing us. So, we drove the migrants away. We had to save ourselves!

Q : What kind of torture would they inflict upon you?

D : They robbed us and caused a lot of nuisance. The price of commodities had gone high. We needed to save ourselves!

Q : How did you drive them away?

D : We went to seek help as all of us were facing a huge loss. There, we were provided with money.

Q : Who gave you the money? Police?

D : Yes, the police. They took people from our village?

Q : And what did they do with you? What was your task?

D : We would destroy the thatched-roofed houses of the refugees and hand them over to the launches, saying, "Go back to Dandakaranya."

Q : Had all of them been taken to Dandakaranya?

D : Yes.

Q : Earlier, someone said that many people were shot dead.

D : Shot? No. There were no gunshots. We are residents of this place. We haven't heard such news. Police opened fire when some people were going towards the market. A woman was killed. When the police unleashed bullets on the refugees, a man from our neighborhood got shot.

Q : The police opened fire at the refugees? Quite a number of people must have died then?

D : Indeed. Some people were shot dead.

Q : How many people were there?

D : I don't remember exactly how many.

Q : But you went to destroy their houses, right?

D : A lot of people went. There were people from outside this village too. We were appointed to evacuate the refugees.

Q : Previously, some people from Kumirmari said that the people of Kumirmari and the refugees shared a good relationship. So, if they were robbing you, how was it possible for them to have a good relationship with other people of Kumirmari?

D : But that area is not in the vicinity. They used to go there occasionally. And, everyone is not the same. There are good and bad people.

Interview : 11th February, 2006.

They Should Not Be Spared

Bhabasindhu Mondal

[Bhabasindhu Mondal was an associate of Dinabandhu Mondal. He wears a tilak on his forehead daily. In his neck there is a small necklace of beads. He is a very pious Vaishnava. Bhabasindhu also joined hands with the goons to destroy the houses of the refugees]

In Marichjhapi, 80 hectares of land was cleaned up by the forest department to plant coconut, tamarisk and eucalyptus trees. Inside the forest, there was a 7 meter wide road. The refugees damaged all of this.

They did not come with prior permission. So, they should not be spared. They said they had 40 thousand people and wanted to build their habitat. Cleaning up the forest, they set up a few marketplaces, installed 20-25 tubewells, felled trees and engaged in fishing. They caused a lot of damage to the forest. The government informed us that they are destroying the Sunderbans. Many policemen arrived in the area and we had to cooperate with them in exchange for wages. The police said, "If you cooperate with us, they won't be able to continue staying here." They would provide us with weapons. As we had gone with them, they told us, "We are with you. Demolish all the houses and we will give you money." We just carried out their orders. We had no plan of our own.

Interview : 11th February, 2006

Marichjhapi, in My View

Birendrakrishna Mridha

[Birendrakrishna Mridha is a resident of Kumirmari. He was in contact with the leaders as well as the refugees of Marichjhapi. How was he connected to them, what did he witness - he tells us his account in detail.]

Q : Your name? How long have you been here?

Birendrakrishna Mridha : Birendrakrishna Mridha. I arrived here from East Bengal in the Bengali year 1388. I used to live in Malikhali village under Shyamnagar Police Station.

Q : Why did you come here from that side?

B.M : Due to political reasons and because of the exchange. I migrated to this place at the age of 10-11. From Gauranga Fanindra Vidyamandir I passed the Madhyamik examination and Matric in 1962. Then, I was admitted to Gaurdanga with Cost Accounting. In my pre-university level, I failed in accountancy. I was disappointed. But I continued going to school in Mayabani. After working for some days in the head post, I passed the preliminary exam. Having been admitted to B.Com, I failed in the first year. After that, I never studied anymore and worked in the Forester in 1972. But I was sacked. I was promised to be called again in the future but that never happened. So I started to deal in paddy. On 8/10th April 1972, the refugees came here from Bangladesh through Kumirmari. They did not have any prior conversation with us. When I was coming from the market, I saw Raiharan Barei, Satish Mondal, Rangalal Goldar and other leaders conducting a meeting at Kumirmari. Raiharan Barei was giving a speech. He asked, "Is there anyone who can help us?" At that time, there were many people who would go to Manikganj flea market. We asked them how we could lend our helping hand. They said, "We will cross the river and go to the other side. We want your permission." On 7th Baisakh (first month of Bengali calendar) they entered in huge numbers and sought for the boats from us. Having crossed the river, they made a "Banbibi's than" and cried their hearts out. As they entered that area, from the next day onwards, more and more people started flocking in everyday. The number of

people reached 10-20 thousand. Next, they began setting up factories such as the bread factory, mustard oil factory, vest factory, bidi factory etc. They were making vests on machines. Not only that, they established markets, schools and practiced literature. Reporters from many newspapers, like Anandabazar Patrika, would come and visit them. The refugees would seek help from us when there was shortage of water due to excessive heat as the ponds went dry. We always tried to help them. They also installed tube wells in their area. In the market, they used to do regular dealings. For rice and paddy they were not dependent on us and arranged them from somewhere else devising different strategies. So, for almost 6-7 months they would come to us to secure water. After that they installed tube wells and stopped seeking help.

Q : Tell me if you had gone to Marichjhapi on your own? What did you see there?

B.M. : I saw them holding meetings to decide their next steps and actions. We did not know everything that was happening over there. We would pay a sudden visit after 2-4 days. I was acquainted with Raiharan Barei, Satish Mondal, Meghnad Shil, Arabinda Mistry and Nirmal Dey. Nirmal Dey stayed in the husking-pedal room of my house for almost 3 months. Raiharan Barei also stayed in my house. But we did not discuss anything with each other. They would not mention anything about their plan. I would only go and pay a visit, nothing more. But for rice and paddy they were not dependent on us as they had other sources. Occasionally, people from this side would go to their place for shopping. When the market price for rice was 3 per kg in our place, they would sell it at 2.5 rupees per kg. Mustard oil was also comparatively cheap there as it was only 5-6 rupees in place of regular market price which is 8. Even fish was very cheap. Thus, they set up a small as well as a big market. The big market was situated at Korankhali and I can't remember where the small market was but it was somewhere in the southern part. It was a dingy stall. They used to hold meetings occasionally and they had started a free rationing system within their community. In this manner, they managed to sustain without much difficulty. Raiharan Barei used to tell us, "We are staying here. We will construct a small township and build a communication network with Kolkata. We are also planning to set up a transportation system, educational institutions, factories and work for the development of this area." We used to be present in some of their meetings. It was declared that : We have formed this organization to bring all of you in here. You should not cut down the trees or

damage the forest. If you cooperate with us, we will arrange for your food. But they had such people in their group who would cut trees from the outer forest and sell them in the villages of Aamtoli or Kalinagar area. They would not pay heed to the interdictions of the leaders. Afterwards, Jyoti Basu held a governmental meeting in Mollakhali after they stayed here for almost a year. Jyoti Basu said, "They need to be evacuated, otherwise the village will suffer." There were some adulators who supported him, others cooperated with both sides and the remaining section was in a dilemma of which side to choose. Then, the police started torturing them. All possible ways of securing food were stopped. The plan was to force them into starvation so that they will automatically evacuate the place. The refugees were simple people. But they were not ready to succumb. But the government desperately wanted to evacuate the place. As this crisis went on, chaos broke loose one day in front of the house of Meni Munda. A government camp was situated there. Police camp. There were two launches as well. I am forgetting the person's name. He introduced himself to us. Kanai Halder, Ashok Mondal were amongst the policemen. Some of them had their house in Medinipur, some in Baruipur. The police contacted us and said, "Help us in our mission." We asked, "What kind of help do you want?"

Q : What kind of help did they want?

B.M. : The police wanted to evacuate the refugees. We said, "How can we do that? It's your job to act as per government orders. We have nothing to do here."

The police didn't offer us any money. And it is true. They told us, "You should make them understand." Suddenly, one day, when some of the refugees had to use their own sturdy boats to go to the other side, bombs were thrown at them. They, in return, chased the police with changas. As the police began firing gunshots, they became astounded. They had no option but to surrender in the face of fiery weapons. Gunshots were fired all around our house. Menimunda was killed. Terrified, we moved into the house. We didn't see anything after that. We didn't realize what was happening. The police went back with the corpses. I don't know what they did with those bodies.

Almost a year later, one day Raiharan Barei and Rabin Chakraborty came to my house. They knew me well. Rabin Chakraborty had a slim appearance, like me.

Raiharan Babu also looked similar. They used to address me as their 'bondhu' (friend). They said, "Friend, we will do an (অষ্টপ্রহর) all-day performance here." "But why will you do that? You have already left the place."

They replied, "Yes, we won't come back anymore. That's why we want to do an all-day performance and leave."

They made clothes for Puja in the school field. Pulin Mondal and Amal Mridha had already passed away. Everyone cooperated to make the all-day performance a success. Raiharan Barei and Rabin Chakraborty brought a good amount of money with them. But they could not find a place to keep that money. So, they wanted to keep the attaché full of money with me. I refused. I told them to take it away. But they kept insisting. I was firm in my decision. Since I didn't know the laws, I refused to invite trouble.

Q : Did you witness the firing done by the police on 31st January, 1979?

B.M. : Yes, I was an eyewitness. It was a bloody revolution. You could barely see it with your own eyes. There was tear gas. Gunshots were charged from all sides. As you went from North to South, you could see people moving from South to the police camps. Almost 20 to 25 people were shot dead in front of our eyes. The corpses were taken to Debjani Launch. This particular launch was used to destroy the small boats. People would struggle in the water. There were women and kids among them who drowned in the river and died. Women got choked in their clothes. They came here with their kids to earn a livelihood. When they were subjected to the blockade, they tried to escape to the other side in search of food. They needed food to survive. Nobody in Kumirmari can blame them for forcefully claiming food or for creating any nuisance. There were no instances like this.

Q : For how long did the police continue this oppression?

B.M. : At least for one and a half weeks.

Q : Police claims there was no casualty except for Meni Munda.

B.M. : No, they are absolute liars. They suppressed it all. If there were reporters to capture the event, the truth would have come out. Everything was done secretly. The law always saves the government. Do they ever confess that they've oppressed their subjects unlawfully? They will do their job. The law will support them unquestionably.

Q : How many boats were destroyed according to you?

B.M : At least one fifty boats. When they escaped, we were afraid to go near the river bank. The police launch would always keep their vigilance so that no reporter could cover anything.

Q : Kashikanta Maitra went with his gang.

B.M. : Yes. Kashikanta Maitra came. There came one more person who was a monk. He arrived one night in light clothes and said, "You need not be afraid. We are with you." He gave us assurance. Coming to our house, he interacted with us. He told me, "Please cooperate with us." I said, "How could we do that?" It has been a few days since we migrated from Bangladesh. We didn't know about the government policies. If we'd help them, we didn't know what danger would await us. He said, "Yes, verbally." We replied, "Yes, we can provide you with as much verbal and mental support as we can." I used to go every day. I initially gave them water from my pond. It was a vast water body covering 15 cotta area. I tried to help them as much as I could. They were very hard working people. Every week they would hold three meetings to discuss people's living conditions. Besides, they would distribute foods such as rice, atta, milk, biscuits etc. Whatever help they received from other sources, they would distribute them to the people in need, like clothes for clothless , shirt-pants for boys etc.

Q : You said they had built many factories there. Have you seen any weapon factories there?

B.M. : No, I haven't seen anything like that, at least not openly. But what I have seen is that they always maintained proper discipline. They had two markets in full swing. They used to perform plays in the place where the big market was situated. There was a school with a huge field in front. People used to play cricket, badminton, and hockey there.

Q : There was a wave of a large number of migrants who came to West Bengal wanting to survive with basic human rights. Now the question is, people who are accustomed to the fertile natural surroundings of Bengal were sent to the infertile, waterless and hilly forestlands outside Bengal. Again, they came back to their motherland, West Bengal. How do you see these events?

B.M : I think it was logical. I don't see any fault of theirs. But there was a political reason behind it. They understood it right that Jyoti Basu had brought them here only for electoral reasons. Initially, they used to praise Jyoti Basu. Later on, they started cursing his name. It was during that time, they were subjected to torture.

Look, I am an old man now. I am on my last leg. But I still remember them. I have tried my heart and soul. But, Jyoti Basu came one day and over a discussion with Prafulla Mondal and Pradip Basu, said, "You would not help them." Despite that, out of humanity, we secretly continued to help them. Because they were Bengali and all they wanted was to stay in Bengal. It was not their fault. If not Marichjhapi, they could have been provided with rehabilitation somewhere else. But, they were evicted from the land and were resent to Dandakaranya. How they were killed and forcefully sent back was absolutely inappropriate. Under no circumstances, humans should be killed so ruthlessly. Everyone wants to survive with their family. Everyone wishes to live a little longer, even an ant. We have read the poem by John Keats, the life history. Nobody wants to die in this world.

Q : But you said there is no data or picture left as evidence of the event. Don't you think people should get justice for being the victim of such unprecedented violation of human rights?

B.M. : There is no doubt about that. Law does not have an expiry date. People die, but the law doesn't. There is still time for justice to be ensured. Above all, there is humanity. And, humans can give justice to their fellow humans. The Constitution is made by them. It is written in the Constitution that any Indian citizen can live in any place of their choice inside India. Even, in the entire world, a person can choose to stay in a place they like. But when they finally got the right to live here after bearing so much pain and suffering, they were evicted from the land ruthlessly.

Yes, they have caused this massacre to happen. The entire charge is against the Left front government. They should never have done that. If people do not stay here, how will the state run!

They stayed here for 12 months, built their own school, hospital, market, factories. And then, torture was unleashed on them. I think they got in the way of the government's interests.

Then one day, police started their oppression. Every night they would visit the houses in search of the refugees. Some houses had kept it a secret and provided shelter to the refugees. For example, Kesto Mondal accommodated 50 families in his house. He was the deputy chief at that time. That's why he managed to give them shelter. He and Prafulla Babaji cooperated with us. When he got the assurance from the deputy chief, he took the initiative. Otherwise, he could not do that.

We tried to feel their pain with our heart and soul. But, in the end, we are humans of flesh and blood. It is impossible to imagine the extent of oppression the police inflicted on them. No human body can bear with that amount of physical and mental torture. This testifies the ruthless suppression conducted by the government.

We would listen to the plans made by Raiharan Barei, Santish Mondal and others to make roads from Marichjhapi to Kumirmari by constructing poles. They had made many such plans. We told them that if that materialized, we would also be happy. I believe, the amount of things they managed to do in such a short span of time, this plan was not out of their reach. But, I advised them not to do anything which did not fit the situation. And also, our village should not be exposed to robbery or other nuisance. They agreed with me. But, sometimes a few scattered incidents of theft had happened in our village.

But yes, many children died while they were kept laying on the cradle. We escaped from the scene. I have witnessed this in Marichjhapi. Apart from being shot dead, people died out of starvation or by eating inedible food. At last, they had no other option but to cut and eat the coconut trees which were planted by the government as a part of the Tiger Project. What else can a starving man do! They would boil tender leaves of coconut trees or spinach and feed their stomach, like primitive men. Many among them escaped. At least 200 people stayed in Kumirmari. When the eviction process started, they escaped and started striking relationships with

people by calling them friends or brothers. They requested people to give them shelter. As they slowly secured shelter for themselves, they settled down here.

Q : How is your relationship with them?

B.M. : Yes. People make friends with other people. There have been a significant number of marital exchanges between them and us. Gora was the first among them. He married a migrant girl. Gora lives in Ghoshpara, Bagna. Prafullo Da knows him. There are some people living in Lenin Colony and also near Majhi's house. Kesto Mondal, whom I talked about earlier, has given shelter to 25 families. They are scattered all around the place. Every place on Kumirmari is full of migrants. They found Dandakaranya unfit for their living. Having no clue regarding what the government's decision or action will be, they are still staying here. They toil hard to earn their livelihood. People from Barisal and Khulna are very skilled in handiworks like making cloths, working at construction sites, masonry etc. and thus they earn their livelihood. Some of them are showing the way as good leaders. You might have seen a person where I was sitting. His son, Jagannath Sarkar, was a member of CPIM before. Now he is having connections with the RSP. He understands politics very well. He passed the secondary exam in 1985 from Kumirmari.

Interview : 24 April,
2007

What Did I See

Basudeb Mondal

[Basudeb Mondal was a member of Kumirmari Panchayat. He was an eyewitness of how the police opened fire on the starving refugees on 31st January, 1979.]

Q : Your name and the name of the place you are in right now.

Basudeb Mondal : Basudeb Mondal. The name of the place is Sardarpara, Kumirmari.

Q : Which post do you hold in the Panchayat?

B.M. : I am a member of the Panchayat in this Sardarpara Booth. When the firing happened, I came here to watch. I was 20/21 years old back then and had good knowledge about things. Many of us stood in Dakshinpara. We saw the episode of firing between the police and the migrants. They also encroached on Sardarpara and shot Meni Munda dead in her own house. The gunshot was charged from outside. The police suspected that there were migrants inside the house. Many migrants were moving to the south in boats. They were hurrying to secure food at any cost. Police opened fire at them and pulled them inside the launch. We saw everything with our own eyes. We saw the launch full of migrants sail away. Since we couldn't come to the spot because of the firing, we saw all this from afar. The migrants were dragged along the road and lifted into the boats. We didn't understand where they were taken to. We didn't go with them. We heard that they were taken to the core area. We didn't know for sure as everything was happening at a distance from us. We were young at that time. As the evening approached, we all returned to our homes. We saw many people were shot dead.

Police used to keep a strong vigil in this place. They would come in launches and patrol the area. They set their camp in the school building of Dakshinpara, beside the forest office in Bagna. As they started seizing the boats, the possible ways of securing food for the migrants were stopped. Once the fighting started, we never went there. Before, we used to visit their locality and saw the school, water taps, shops, hospital, different types of bread factories they had set up. We had no disputes with them. We would visit their markets. They would bring wood to the market. We would go there often to see how they had built a market and hospital in a place like Sundarban. We had no conflict between us. Gora, a boy from Marichjhapi, even married Madhu's daughter from Ghoshpara. When we went to their place, they behaved so well with us. I had a close acquaintance with a boy. I can't remember his name - Pnachu or something like that. After that, they went away. I had no further contact with him.

Interview : 24 April,
2007

Role of the Left Front Government

Ashoke Choudhury

[Ashoke Choudhury was a prominent leader of RSP Krishak Front. He was the M.L.A of Basanti. His words depict how he perceived the event that happened in Marichjhapi.]

Question : The burning issue of post-independence India, which is the refugee crisis, is our topic of discussion. There is a difference in the way refugees of Punjab and West Bengal were dealt with. There are many reasons behind that. The steady flow of migrants coming to West Bengal is still active. People who had arrived in recent times belong to the scheduled caste and peasant class. The Communist Party of India and their associate leftist parties have provided them with support and assistance. And, people who came from East Pakistan or today's Bangladesh have been their leaders. There should be a political party to properly play their part. We have seen earlier that a large section of refugees have been sent to Andaman. The Leftists protested against this by saying, "They cannot be sent to land of black water". Here, starting from Raipur to various camps of West Bengal like Bagjola, Kupas camp, Dhubulia etc., people were kept for 8-10 years like refugees without much attention. They were suppressed with guns and were subjected to ruthless tortures. As a result, continuous rage was being piled up inside them. After that, they were sent to various regions as a part of the "Dandakaranya Project". But the project, too, was not implemented properly. Ram Chatterjee, Kiranmoy Nanda and Samar Mukherjee visited the camps at that time and witnessed the immense suffering of the refugees. Ram Chatterjee had been there multiple times. He had held meetings and gave speeches addressing the suffering masses. He said, "You should go to West Bengal. 50 million people will extend their welcoming arms for you." Under these circumstances, more than 1 lakh refugees arrived at Hasnabad and tried to survive in infernal living conditions for more than a year under the open sky. 30 to 40 thousand people went to Marichjhapi and stayed there for more than a year. They created a self-reliant economy. All they wanted was to make the place suitable for their living without any help from the government. Yet, the government evicted them forcefully. Why did that happen?

Ashoke Choudhury : In my opinion, this happened for two reasons. I was in Kumirmari at that time. One of the ministers named Debabrata Bandyopadhyay was also with us. Most of the people who settled down in Marichjhapi came from Khulna and Jessore whereas people staying in Kumirmari or Mollakhali originally belonged to the border areas of Khulna and Jessore, like, the other side of Shyamnagar, Itinda etc. When they arrived as refugees, they were sent to different camps in Dandakaranya. When this operation was happening, Mehr Chand Khanna was the Union Minister for Rehabilitation. He came from the West Frontier Province. It was at the border of Punjab. That's why no sympathy was shown to the refugees of Bengal. It was the same earlier. During partition, when the exchange of population and property was taking place, there was no consideration for the people of Bengal. Neither the Congress nor the Leftists raised their voice in favor of the Bengalis. It was evident that the Central government was afraid of the Bengali community. If the partition hadn't happened, the population of Bengal would reach 22 crores by now. As far the proportional representation is concerned, there would have been the highest number of M.P.s from the Bengal province. Keeping all this in mind, they divided Bengal in such a way that there is no Hindu population within 5 miles of the border in 9 districts. Cows are being traded illegally. On top of that, BDR/BSF are involved in smuggling. Disputes between them often end in gun fights. Not only that, BSF commit violence against the people of this side, from physically assaulting the women to what not, they do every ruthless thing possible. Even the government doesn't pay any attention to the situation of these helpless people. When a person is shot dead, the local police station comes to investigate. But BSF doesn't listen to them. In the border areas from Kochbihar to Nadia and 24 Parganas, almost 10 million people live under such conditions. The government apprehended that the local residents of Khulna and those who came from Khulna and Barisal to settle down in Marichjhapi might get united. There was an economic problem as well. If habitation is created by clearing the forest area, there would be a water crisis. To get sweet water from a tube well, the ground must be dug upto 8 to 10 thousand feet, otherwise it's all salt water. To go to Kumirmari from Marichjhapi, one needs to cross a small river. Now, these people come to Kumirmari and beg for rice and dal. People give them food.

Q : Initially, the people of Kumirmari supported them. When the people from Udbastu Unnoyon Samiti came from Dandakaranya and had a discussion with local people, they wanted support from the locals. The locals morally supported them and said if we have been able to live here, why won't you. Depending on this, people migrated here from Dandakaranya.

A.C. : I am not aware of this fact. People had different reasons for coming here. It's a controversial matter as to who had motivated them to come here. Many held Ram Babu responsible for this. The thing is, after coming here, they would buy everything available in the market. Kumirmari is a big village situated upon the island. As they demanded food and rice, the local people got panicked by their aggressiveness. Then, we started wondering how we would manage to provide shelter for this huge number of people. The government also didn't resist them coming and they came in huge numbers. There was a coconut forest. 10,000 coconut trees were planted there. They destroyed and ate them all. I cannot remember the details since this happened so long ago. Then, they came to the bazaar and started begging. Kumirmari itself is full of poor people, how long can they continue to deliver? Initially, they had sympathy for the refugees. But as they went on delivering food, the sympathy vanished. Such was the scenario. Suddenly, one day some leaders of CPIM visited the place. Police and the refugees were already involved in a fight. Gunshots, including blank fire, were fired. About 300 refugees escaped to Kumirmari. Police went to the camps. Having scattered all over the village, they started firing randomly. I can't say how many people died from that firing. But one Adivasi woman who was cooking in her kitchen, I mean shed, was shot dead by the police from point blank range. At this, all the residents of Kumirmari got agitated. The police went back to their camps and didn't show courage to come out. Hearing all this, Debrabrata Babu (Debu Babu) and us, the RSP leaders, visited the place. There were no CPIM leaders. Our people moved from the side of Mollakhali whereas Debu Babu and I went from the side of Gosaba. Rangabelia. Almost 2 to 3 hundred tear gas shells were launched. Gunshots were fired. If there were any casualties, we couldn't know that because the corpses were disposed somewhere else. The firing happened towards the afternoon. As we went there, the government declared that they had done injustice to people. Nikhil Babu, who was the member of Bidhan Sabha gave a speech on this in April, '79. Now, Jyoti Babu woke up from his sleep and realized the crime

they had committed. Debu Babu called them uncivilized and said the firing was absolutely unnecessary. There were about 200 people who used to roam around in the fields of Kumirmari. They could gradually be incorporated into the village. In place of that, political parties got involved. In my opinion, CPIM was definitely there, though I don't know the names of those people. In the presence of Jyoti Basu's consigliere, Shankar Gupta, husband of Shyamali Debi the firing happened. He has passed away, so I won't say much about him now. A woman was shot dead. Amiya Samanta was the S.P. at that time. The family was compensated with lands. In the meeting, Biren Babu confessed that they had killed people which could never be compensated. But he promised to provide as much support as possible to the family of the deceased. That was enough to keep the agitation under control for the time being. Otherwise, people got extremely aggressive. Then, there was a division between us and them. It was as if they would stay if they could. But, we didn't take that discussion further because we never wanted them to settle down there. I thought the place was not fit to provide shelter for all those people. There was a crisis of food and water, no markets, no earning opportunity in that area. I thought they would be unable to sustain and leave the place eventually, because how would so many people survive without the basic means?

The May conference of Kishan Sabha was supposed to be held at Canning. So, 40 to 50 thousand people came to Canning to attend the meeting. S.P. Amiya Samanta and other police officers utilized the time playfully to carry out the forceful evacuation process. It was Jyoti Basu's strict order. Two to three thousand armed policemen arrived at the spot in 70-80 launches at night. They invaded the houses and forcefully hauled them inside of the launch at gunpoint. Some of our people saw this happening in front of their eyes. The fishing of prawn in the river was stopped. They hauled people inside of the launch at gunpoint.

Q : I have one thing to say. The launches were seized from Diamond Harbour, Canning and Habra. Prasanta Halder, the secretary of the Launch Union, said that this is against the international as well as national Water Law. When they wrote a letter to Jyoti Babu stating the same, he said there would be an investigation regarding this.

A.C. : But that investigation never happened....

Q : Journalist Niranjan Halder told me about you. He said that Ashoke Choudhury knows it well because he couldn't come to Canning to attend the meeting due to the seizure of all these launches.

A.C. : Yes, we could not. But, before that, we took 8 launches from Diamond Harbour only for ferrying purposes. People crossed the river on boats. During April and May, the Matla river usually remains very turbulent. Suddenly, all the launches were seized from Diamond Harbour as there were more launches. Launches were taken from Canning and Hasnabad too. The number reached almost 70 to 80.

Q : After the seizure of these launches, did all the members manage to come to Kisan Sabha?

A.C. : Some people from Kumirmari and Satjelia could not come to the open rally. Towards the end of the conference as we got very busy, the news reached us that people were forcefully taken to Hasnabad in these launches at gunpoint.

Q : Not only this incident, I would like to remind you of another one. At that time, the refugees were subjected to economic as well as food blockade. Their boats were destroyed. We have interviewed the people who used to drive these launches and also those who were put into use for destroying the boats. After destroying the boats, they entered the area to pick people up. You have mentioned the name of Amiya Samanta. He said only two people had died. I told him that I had proof of how many people had died or got injured. I met people who received a bullet and got his leg amputated. The High Court gave an order that food and water supply could not be blocked by any means. So, in place of that, they stopped all possible ways of ferrying to the other side for securing food. And, this served the purpose both ways - the law was obeyed as well as the mission was accomplished.

A.C. : The police had already started patrolling the area in launches to stop them from ferrying to the other side. Without having an alternative, as the refugees attempted to come out, the police opened fire at them which caused the life of that Adivasi woman. Then, the government decided that on the day of the RSP meeting, the area would be reasonably empty and so the evacuation could be implemented

without much trouble. It was a tactical decision. We never thought that they would be forcefully taken away like this. The evacuation continued the entire night. When our people reached there, Marichjhapi was already empty. People who came to the rally on foot, on returning they saw there were no people in Marichjhapi. It was around mid May. Yet, we have no evidence that the police had entered into the area. But, no doubt, the evacuation was done forcefully. Our former Chief Minister Jyoti Basu's explicit order was carried out by the police. The refugees were taken to Hasnabad, then to Bardwan and from there they were sent back.

Q : Let me ask you something, there was a political motive behind it, isn't it?

A.C. : Definitely! Politics definitely had a major part to play....

Q : What is that according to you? We have heard one thing repeatedly from them that CPIM wanted the refugees to merge with their refugee organization. But the refugees did not agree to it. The second reason is, all of this was possible because they were from a backward class. If they belonged to the middle class, it wouldn't have happened.

A.C. : It is not entirely true that they were treated badly because they belonged to the backward class. You might have seen that throughout history, in any political and peasant movement, the upper class people have led the way, whereas there was no representation from the lower class.

Q : What might be its political reason? When they came here without any obstruction. Then, they built a school, hospital, playground and alternative fishing techniques. They would take the fish to the market. The vendors would buy fish for them. Overall, they were all set to set up a planned colony.

A.C. : CPIM never wanted a colony.

Q : Then why did CPIM let them come?

A.C. : Since there was no news, they didn't realize the magnitude of the event. But, they did not want a colony to be set up. It was obvious that the refugees would

form a stronger connection with RSP because we were in close association with them. So, to keep their authority intact, the CPIM never wanted the population to grow in that locality. Such a mindset was at play. Then we told them that the relationship between the refugees and the local people is getting stronger with time and so the government needs to take a stand. Jyoti Basu attended a meeting at Mollakhali. Almost 40000 people gathered there. Jyoti Basu said, "We will see that the refugees are rehabilitated in Malkangiri and Dandakaranya instead of Marichjhapi. He gave them assurance in that meeting.

Q : But the problem was that although they were provided with 1 acre to 3 acre land in Malkangiri, the area was absolutely unfit for agriculture. There was no proper irrigation system. Only a canal is dug out from the river Poteru to get necessary water. There is nothing else. People are literally begging there, still now. I have seen this with my own eyes and shot it for evidence. That's why they wanted to leave the place and settle down here covering such a long distance. There were two reasons behind this. One, Being Bengalis, they wanted to stay in Bengal and two, being agrarian people, they wanted to stay in the land of water. UNESCO has declared a resolution that any person on earth has the right to stay in any country and they can come back to their own country if they wish to. We were informed of two things. One, the refugees are destroying the forestland and disrupting the ecological balance in that area and two, they have foreign connections. All these reasons were given behind their evacuation. But we haven't found any evidence for their accusations.

A.C. : It was a made-up story that they had foreign connections. A fisherman community used to live on an island beside Gangasagar. They were accused of the same thing. They always raise this issue of foreign conspiracy. That is their habit. It is not wrong to have a desire to live in Bengal if you are a Bengali.

Q : The fact is, people living in M.P. and Malkangiri have to write Hindi and Odia respectively as their mother tongue. There is nothing more painful than that. I will show this to you when I make the film. They still have to face this. Their Bengali education has been stopped. Still, they are protesting against it to preserve the language. What is the function of law? If it is for people, or people are for law? What should be our stand?

A.C. : The laws in our country now are inhuman. You cannot be in support of these laws. Let's say, we have 144 Section IPC in our country. Starting from the British period, to suppress any movement this section 144 is enforced. There are other laws like Section 107 and 151 which are hard to be in support of. One's free movement can be restricted by Section 107 and 151 and any form of democratic movement can be labeled as illegal by Section 144. So, it's impossible to support these laws. In our country, there are not many laws written in favor of people. From section 1 to 500, no criminal law was written in favor of people. They were made by the British for the sake of their colonial administration. The entire system has been kept intact. Even Churchill in his book of history stated that Indians are lower breed people and so they won't need any law meant for a civilized society. I can show you the book where he had written this. So, it is clear from his statement what kind of administrative system we had. And, that legacy has been carried on until today without much change. Now, if a common person in our country suffers from any form of injustice or unlawful exploitation, it's hard for him to get justice. To go to the High Court or the Supreme Court, one needs to have a lot of money. It's impossible to spend that much money for a common man or a poor person and to fight a legal case in court. So, the entire legal system in our country is inhuman. Talking about the rule of law, if you notice its practice and implementation in reality, you'd realize that the entire culture has degenerated. So, we are not in a position to feel proud of the rule of law as an Indian citizen.

We should take the entire history into reconsideration. The events happened so rapidly during that time that we couldn't think of a long term plan as to what to do with the refugees. I told you about our weakness. But the way the evacuation happened by suppressing them with guns, is not acceptable. The government should have declared their policy up front instead of letting them enter Marichjhapi unobstructed in the first place. In place of that, later they evacuated the place forcefully by suppressing them with guns and sent them to a desert where it was impossible to survive. After I came here to Bengal in 1949, there was an exodus from East Bengal. As a riot broke out in Barishal, people started to run away. Dr. Meghnad Saha was the President of East Bengal Relief Society at that time. His office was at 91, Dharmatala Street. We left our jobs and joined the relief work. We would give people food and water, and help them to get into different camps in

Cooper's, Dhubulia for shelter. At that time, some people came to us in Gede and said, "We are farmers. We can't go to the camps. Instead, even if we have to beg or work as laborers, we are ready to do that. Gopal Maitra, Satya Bhattacharya and I told them, "You stay here in East Bengal Relief Society. We will give you khichuri in the morning and rice at night to eat." We had built a camp near Kiosk no 84 at the bank of a stream in Gede. One of our friends named Pathik Biswas was shot dead by the Pakistanis in that place. I was present there, a little far away from the place. He was shot because he was wearing Khaki. This started non-stop firing between the two groups. There were few local boys from Majdia. Kalika Prasad from RSP, who is not alive anymore, told us about a 3-4 mile vast stretch of land near Bhimpur and Krishnaganj Police Station which was lying unoccupied because the Muslims had escaped out of fear. He advised us to get hold of the land and to set a camp.. Instead of sending them to other camps, he suggested that we should provide them shelter at the bank of the river. Following his words, we provided shelter to 1100 families there. Along with that, the poor people in the village were made to settle down in the three and a half bigha of land. Later we came to know that the government had acquired the land to build an agricultural farm. After fighting a case for 2-3 years, the government lifted the acquisition and gave the land to the people. This happened because a Sub Divisional Officer named Mr. Biswas belonged to the scheduled caste and the people who settled down there were from the same community. He also thought us to be of scheduled caste and said, "You have done a good job, helping people to survive." The land was fertile. With any fertilizer, the land was able to produce 12 to 14 mounds of paddy. The farmers named the place as "Swarnakhali " since the land produced gold. The land didn't have any name earlier. We tried to provide people with lands wherever we could acquire them. And, it helped to eradicate poverty within a year.

Q : Tarakunda exchanged letters with Niranjan Halder. From his letters, we came to know about the events. He was a journalist in Anandabazar Patrika. You might remember, there came an investigation committee from the Parliament under the leadership of Prasannabhai Mehta. There were two other people.

A.C. : Look, CPIM is a big party and so is their politics! The other parties are relatively smaller and so CPIM never pay any heed to their words. When such an

authoritarian party comes to power, they never listen to anyone else. They only listen to the Police and the rich.

In Marichjhapi, there came people from both Jassore and Khulna. Majority of them belonged to the scheduled caste. It was the same with Kumirmari. That's why there was a general sense of national unity among them. Still, people were annoyed over the fact that how could so many people be accommodated in that space, what would they eat etc. People were apprehensive about this. Despite that, people had genuine concern and feelings for them because they were Bengalis and they didn't find any harm in sharing space with them. The majority had the same opinion.

Q : Please tell me more about the relationship between Kumirmari and Mollakhali.

A.C. : We couldn't help them much on our behalf. But, when they would come to Kumirmari market, people helped them with food and water. They were allowed to take potfuls of water from the tubewell. It was not possible for us to install a tube well there. So, they would secure drinking water from Kumirmari. They bathed in the ponds of Kumirmari and nobody objected to it. In Particular, the women would go around in boats without any obstruction. So, the government took a policy that they need to be evicted by showing reasons like population equilibrium was getting disrupted or forest was being destroyed. For the next 6 months, the government did not take any decision.

Q : Did you say anything in protest during that time?

A.C. : No, we didn't protest much. We suggested that if they are to be eventually evicted, it should not be done by force, rather they need to be convinced in some other way. If some people could be resettled here, others could have been provided with rehabilitation somewhere else. We raised the issue of 'Dandakaranya Project' in the meeting 2-3 times, but the chief secretary who was supposed to be present there did not attend the meeting. We wanted an informative report about the 'Dandakaranya Project' but the government did not provide that. So, we didn't have any information as to how those people were living there.

Q: Saibal Gupta was the Chairman of 'Dandakaranya Project' at that time but he resigned from the post and came back.

A.C. : No one did anything substantial. The Central Government Refugee Development Department was withdrawn by declaring it as a closed chapter. Not only that, after a certain date, they stopped providing doles to the refugees. So, it was evident that the central government always had a vindictive mentality towards the Bengalis. The partition of Bengal was extremely injurious for the existence of West Bengal. Without reopening it, there are no other alternatives.

Q: Do you want those people to get justice?

A.C. : Yes, definitely I want it. Thousands and millions of people had lost everything. If you can't provide justice to them, what is left to be judged?

Q: The other thing was no journalist was allowed to enter the space. Those who entered, did it secretly. The government didn't allow them to keep any evidence.

A.C. : No government wants the facts to come out.

Q: The effort was made so that no news could be leaked out. If everything gets exposed today, which role would you play? I want your personal opinion.

A.C. : There are two possibilities. One, there can be nationwide debate regarding the entire incident that happened in Marichjhapi delving into its cause and the Central government as well as the government of West Bengal can be subjected to an explanation. Two, after accumulating facts on the refugees of Dandakaranya, we can put pressure on the local government regarding their action and role in it as to why they are taking the lives of thousands of Bengalis. And, there should be a nationwide movement on this issue.

The political tragedy of Bengalis is that they are a self-destructive community. They can easily slip the past into oblivion. And, this politics of hatred started by CPIM can make people forget their past very quickly.

Interview : 8 March,
2007

Government Directive

Debabrata Bandopadhyay

[Debabrata Bandopadhyay was the minister of the 'Panchayat' ministry of the first Left Front government. At the advice of Jyoti Basu and at the order of the Chief Secretary Amiya Sen, he went to Marichjhapi.]

In 1977, he was a minister of the first 'Correctional Administration and Panchayat' ministry.

Q : After the partition, the wave of refugees migrating towards West Bengal never ceased, only there were fluctuations in terms of numbers.

Debabrata Bandopadhyay : Yes, in this movement my party and I were very much involved. When the refugees started migrating here in huge numbers, the 'West Bengal Relief Committee' was set up under the leadership of Dr. Meghnad Saha. Amar Banerjee was the secretary, Meghnad Saha the president and Nikhil Das was one of the main officials. When the 'East Bengal Refugee Committee' was established, that initiative had left a huge impact in 1950 which resulted in the formation of UCRC under the leadership of the communist party. And, our party RSP led to the formation of RCRC (Refugee Central Rehabilitation Center). Meghnad Saha and Amar Banerjee were a part of it. UCRC and RCRC tried their best to contribute to the refugee movement. Especially in the areas like Bagha Jatin, Vidyasagar Colony, Netaji Colony, Jadavpur, RSP had an absolute influence. We were very much involved with the refugee movement.

Q : After this, almost one and a half lakh people stayed in different refugee camps such as Bagjola Camp, Mana Camp, Koopers Camp etc for 8-9-10 years. They were living in inhuman conditions. There was a Satyagraha movement led by your party. But after that, when the Dandakaranya Project happened, the refugees were

rehabilitated in 7 provinces among which were Malkangiri and Umerkot in Orissa. Malkangiri is a dry area populated with wild animals like bears and tigers. People who moved there initially got 6 acres of land and the lot that moved after, got 4 acres. It is seen that they left everything there and came back.

D.B. : It was 1978-79. The left front government just came to power in West Bengal. Our party had 3 ministers in the ministry who were Jatin Chakraborty, Nani Bhattacharya and I. I was in charge of the correctional administration and the panchayat. The way the central government made promises to the refugees of East Bengal to send them to the Dandakaranya Project, it was illogical and misplanned. The refugees were living there complying with severe mismanagement and inhuman living conditions. So, we felt an urge to do something for them. On behalf of the left front government, we visited them. We told them to come to West Bengal and promised them to arrange for their settlement in a place called Marichjhapi. Following this, many people came to West Bengal. If Dandakaranya had better living conditions, they wouldn't have done that. Since that place was not fit for agriculture and there was no plan for a proper rehabilitation, they came back to West Bengal in huge numbers. I still remember, in 1978, the Chief Secretary of West Bengal Mr. Amiya Sen took the initiative to visit Marichjhapi or nearby places to understand the situation. On behalf of CPIM, RSP and RSP, Binoy Choudhury, Kamal Guha and I went there to survey the situation and the arrangements.

Q : Did this happen in '79 when they had already set up a school and a hospital in their locality?

D.B. : Yes, towards '79. All of this had already happened. Then Amiya Sen told us, "Look, your party and RSP really has a lot of influence in that area. You should visit these places in Gosaba, where you have a strong hold and also Marichjhapi, located near Kumirmari that is on the opposite of Mollakhali. I still remember when I was making plans on going there or asking them to come through the Karan river, they thought that we were government representatives. They also recognized the officer as the Chief Secretary. They assumed that we had gone there to convince them about going back to Dandakaranya. That's why, they started raining arrows on us from the other side. The arrows landed 5-6-7 feet away from where I

was standing. Now, as you are asking me all these questions, I'm sure everyone wants to know what we had to say to them. During that time, our Prime Minister Morarji Desai's opinion was that West Bengal had become overcrowded with refugees so they should be sent back to Dandakaranya. He was very firm in his opinion and became much eager to take steps accordingly. But Shri Kashikanta Maitra, one of the leaders of Janata Dal in West Bengal, advocated for providing rehabilitation for the refugees in Marichjhapi and he started campaigning for that. I saw this with my own eyes that Morarji Desai was very much upset with Kashi Kanta. Our RSP leaders who were present there also believed that the refugees should be settled in Marichjhapi and the government has responsibility towards them.

Q : I would like to mention one more incident. When a team of 8 people came to Marichjhapi, they landed in Kumirmari first. There they contacted a schoolmaster who told them, "If we can stay here, why can't you?" I think he was associated with RSP.

D.B. : Yes, I can't remember the name at this moment. But he (Pradip Biswas) was an active RSP worker and a leader.

Q : And, RSP cooperated with them in whichever way possible.

D.B. : Yes, they did. And local members from our party who were influential at that time, especially wanted this to happen. When the central government couldn't arrange for their rehabilitation and Morarji Desai was insisting on sending them to Dandakaranya, it was not possible for us to throw them away to the den of death just like that. So, bearing a lot of suffering we called them up thinking that if we could stay here, why not them. But later on I realized if the Dandakaranya Plan had been successful, there was no need for them to come back. My party and I believe that Bengalis living outside of Bengal help to spread the Bengali culture in other places which is a good thing. So, ethically we were in support of the Dandakaranya Project. But, the way they were sent there, whimsically without any proper arrangement was an injustice according to us. We found Morarji Desai's proposal legitimate because there was no doubt that West Bengal became overcrowded with millions of refugees coming after in the period of 1947-50. If they were

rehabilitated somewhere else, we would get rid of overpopulation. But that should be done with a proper arrangement. As far as we knew, there was no sustainable living arrangement in Dandakaranya. Even the land distribution plan in certain places was not executed properly. Even if some people got the land, there was no scope of farming and also no arrangement for that. So naturally the question arises if the left front ministers and leaders had gone there to call them back. The answer is yes. It was no because everyone was in favor of that, rather for the simple reason that the rehabilitation happened without any planning and there was mismanagement in every sphere. So how could we ask them to stay there? But ethically we were in support of the fact that the establishment of the Bengali community in a place other than Bengal would definitely help the Bengali culture flourish. Since the project was executed so whimsically, we thought it wasn't right for them to stay there. That's why the leaders of the district of the 24 Parganas decided to provide shelter for the refugees in their area.

Q : Let me give you some news. The refugees staying in Madhya Pradesh have to write their mother tongue as Hindi and in case of Malkangiri, it is Odia.

D.B. : So yes, you are right. We misjudged it when we thought that Bengalis living elsewhere would help spread Bengali culture and art. But it is actually the opposite in reality. They are even forgetting their own mother tongue. On top of that, they are forced to study Hindi and Odia.

Interview : 27th February, 2007

Autocracy of Jyoti Basu

Prafulla Mondal

[Since 1978, for 25 years straight, Prafulla Mondal was the Panchayat Pradhan of the Kumirmari island. The impact of Marichjhapi fell upon Kumirmari. What role did Prafulla Mondal play during that time?]

Q : The topic of our discussion is Marichjhapi. The refugees arrived in Marichjhapi, located at the opposite side of Kumirmari. What was your role in this entire episode dealing with the refugees?

Prafulla Mondal : In 1978, I became the Pradhan of village administration. Comrade Pradip Biswas was in our party at that time. He became a member of Zilla Parishad and a supporter of RSP. After I became the Pradhan, the refugees arrived in 1978. We had the news in advance. They came in huge numbers, like floods. Through Kumirmari, Jogeshganj and different routes of Satjelia they first entered Marichjhapi.

There was a plantation in Marichjhapi. In our opinion, it was almost 100 acres wide. They entered that space first. We didn't have any orders to assist them. So, we neither helped, nor opposed their actions. Pradip Biswas and I would visit the area occasionally to check what they were doing, who they were, where they had come from etc. Probably, they had a leader named Sukhchar Mondal. He was supervising everything. Sukhchar Mondal and Satish Mondal - these two people. Identity wise, most of them belonged to the Namasudra community who came from Jassore, Khulna and Barisal. Although I was born in Kumirmari, my father and forefathers were originally from Khulna. There was a slight difference in our language.

They started staying there. But after 5-6 months, the government decided to evacuate them. They thought that the government of West Bengal, especially Jyoti Babi and RSP were in support of them.

After many meetings and rallies, one day the D.M. summoned us. Pradip Biswas and I went to meet him. We had a discussion. The D.M. said steadfastly, "You all should lead the evacuation of the refugees." We replied, "Look, you are not our leader. We can't do anything unless our comrade Nikhil Das gives us an order. But we can assure one thing, we are neither helping the refugees, nor opposing them." D.M. - No, you must oppose.

No, we can't.

Q : How did he want you to oppose?

P.M. : By opposition, he (D.M.) wanted to mean that we should assist the police and other forces in the process of evacuation. I told him clearly, "It is not possible

for us. Even if our party orders us to fight, we won't do that because we are Bengalis."

Q : Did he tell you how exactly he wanted you to cooperate with them?

P.M. : Cooperation means to be with them. He wanted the RSP leaders in Kumirmari to assist them. I told him that it was not possible for us.

Q : He wanted you to act as goons and help them in evacuation?

P.M. : Much like that. It means we should join hands with them in oppressing the refugees - such was the situation!

As we denied his demands, after 4 days Pradip Biswas and I received two letters. Mentioning a date Jyoti Basu has written, on that day we should meet him at the Writer's. Nikhil Da (Nikhil Da) informed us to come to the Writer's on that day assuring that he would be there.

We went. Nikhil Da told us to be a little considerate in our approach towards Jyoti Basu.

At first, Jyoti Babu asked, "Do you know why I called you?"

We responded, "no".

He said, "I've called you because you are helping the refugees."

Pradip Da (Pradip Biswas) said, "No, we are not helping them."

Jyoti Basu : Then what are you doing?

Pradip Biswas : We are neither helping the refugees, nor opposing them.

Jyoti Basu : There is an order by the central government that the refugees should be evacuated from the area. I've called you because you are the leaders of the Left Front there. If you have helped them already, stop doing that in future. Or else, I will take action.

Q : What action was he talking about?

P.M. : He would arrest us.

Nikhil Da kept mum. Suddenly, something came into my head and I said, "Jyoti Da, I am the age of your grandson." I was very young then. I was doing my first

term in the Panchayat just after passing out from college. I was around 23/24 years of age.

Jyoti Basu - Yes.

Do you think the Bengalis are like cattles?

Jyoti Basu - What do you mean?

He got very angry.

Look, they were driven away from Bangladesh (East Pakistan). Like battles, they were kept in Mana Camp, Andaman Islands and other places at the whim of the government. After that, a certain political party provoked them to come to Sundarban. If the government did not want to provide them shelter, why didn't they send them back from the border? Despite being allowed to enter, they were ruthlessly suppressed and sent back.

That means, the Bengalis will continue to be oppressed.

Jyoti Basu looked at Nikhil Da, dissatisfied. But I wanted to speak on. Nothing more than imprisonment could be charged against me.

Jyoti Basu : Listen boy, I am not accustomed to hearing such words from you people. But I said one thing - they need to be evicted. I won't deny what you said. The government was at fault.

Prafulla - But the refugees have to pay the price of the mistake. Thousands of people will lose their life or they will be driven away and turn homeless.

Jyoti Basu - Whatever. There is nothing called sentiment in politics. You should not cooperate with them from now on.

Thus the meeting ended.

In reality, we do help them. They have their own way of living.

Then came that day.

We saw hundreds of launches containing military forces, paramilitary forces, RAF etc. They took control of the area and set out fire at night in the places where the refugees lived. Helpless screams could be heard from all corners. We were at the other side of the river. It went on for the entire night. The corpses were loaded into the launches in sacks and were taken to deep forest. We watched everything. In the morning, there was no trace of it. We went to visit the place the following afternoon. We saw 7-8 children lying dead in front of the houses with their bodies half-burnt. No words can describe that. This was even more horrific than Jallianwala Bagh. Ah, Bengalis are being evicted!

Some days before the eviction, while attacking the refugees, police shot an adivasi woman named Meni Munda dead.

They barricaded the entire area. The refugees were not allowed to come to Kumirmari, so they couldn't secure food or water. But when some of them tried to cross the river driven by hunger, police launched bullets at them. Amidst all this, Meni Munda was killed. As the Pradhan of the village I sent out a note stating she was a woman from my village. The B.D.O. gave a compensation of five thousand rupees. I gave them the money.

Q : Did the police destroy the boats of the refugees?

P.M. : After coming here, the refugees made a few wooden boats which they used for fishing and bringing food. Thus, they earned their livelihood. But the police completely destroyed all the boats.

Q : The accusations Jyoti Basu made against the refugees, like they have foreign alliance, they are associated with illegal peddling, they are destroying the forestland etc - but the report of the forest department says that there were no big trees in that area and it was mostly filled with weeds. What is your opinion about that?

P.M. : The place they were residing, meaning the Plantation area, had no such big trees. The forest department had planted some coconut trees there. But there was nothing else.

The damage they are talking about - I have seen the refugees collect wood from the market for fuel, especially for the purpose of cooking. We never saw them cutting big trees. And if they had done that, they would have to carry them through our area. We had not seen anything like that. I think all these are excuses.

Q : But, for making a boat you need to cut a big tree. Otherwise, how would they get the wood?

P.M. : They made small boats like dinghies which could contain only 3-4 people. They made them with small trees from the plantation area.

Q: They lived there for almost a year. I've heard within that time they managed to set up a school, a playground, a hospital and retained their culture and economy - have you seen all of it?

P.M. : They set up schools and shops and brought the goods from Basirhat.

Q : They set up an autonomous and self-reliant society. Without the help of either central or state government, their school would be run by a parallel administration - if you can tell us more about this?

P.M. : As far as I have seen them, they were never under the control of any government. Suppose, around one lakh people have gathered in one place. They have no government, no race, no nothing. But to survive in that area, they collectively set up a primary school, installed tubewells and opened shops. They were self-reliant. It would be wrong to label it as an autonomous government or institution. To fulfill their bare necessities, to give education to their children they started the school. This has nothing to do with opposing the government. If the government had thought about the refugees, they should have made shops, schools, and colleges for them.

Q : Jyoti Basu said it was a directive from the central government to evacuate them. But the opposition party Janata Dal is talking in favor of the refugees in the state legislative assembly. On the other hand, Morarji is in power at the center with the help of CPIM. The Morarji government sent a representative body consisting of 3 people. But CPIM did not let the report be submitted to the parliament by

showing reasons like, "matter of the state" and 3 members of the body are from the Janata Party.

What was the political reason behind their evacuation?

P.M. : The reason behind this is yet to be known. The government showed a reason which was somehow logical. The rest were not. Sundarban is a deep forest. The more deforestation happens, the more natural disasters will occur. This logic is still acceptable, although not fully. Because deforestation is happening very frequently. The timber merchants are doing that. Nowadays it doesn't happen that much though. But, if the refugees cut the trees, the natural balance will be disrupted - this logic cannot be fully accepted. Actually, the government had other reasons.

Q : The DM called you for help. We have met and interviewed some people who helped the police to set the house of the refugees on fire and to evacuate them from the area and in return, they received money from the police. Who were they? Were they members of the CPIM?

P.M. : Politically, yes. You may say so. In every village there were loompens, goons and murderers who worked under the banner of the CPIM. They carried this out.

Q : What was the main occupation of the refugees?

P.M. : They had some money which they had saved for a long time in hope to find a shelter. How long could they sustain only by selling fuel wood? There were plenty of fish in the river. Most of the people would do fishing in small dinghies.

Q : During the time, the government, especially the CPIM accused them of being associated with anti-national and anti-governmental activities. Do you think the refugees had such connections?

P.M. : I don't know what they meant by anti-government. But a group of people came for survival and stayed here. I think, by anti-government the CPIM wanted to mean that they had foreign connections or they had association with the goons and

loompens etc. I have been there many times - I don't think there were any situations like this.

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