



Research Paper

# Tears of Marichjhapi Migrants: State and Structural Violence Upon The People Of Sundarbans

Mamoon Bhuyan

Ex-Student, Department of Sociology, Jamia Millia Islamia  
Department of Sociology, University of Delhi

## ABSTRACT

It has been a couple of decades that Hannah Arendt wrote canonical 'We Refugees', published in *The Jewish Writings*. Structural violence perpetuated by those in power over innocent population has left the marginalized in a miserable state. In this article, I have tried to highlight the incidents of late 1970s in an island of Sundarbans named Marichjhapi where state sponsored structural violence has changed destiny of thousands of innocent migrants.

**Keywords:** Migration, refugees, state, caste.

## METHODOLOGY

This research paper is of descriptive nature and qualitative method has been widely applied. Secondary data has been collected through extensive case studies and literature review. Primary data has been collected from my visit to Sundarbans, primarily through in-depth interviews.

Received 07 Mar, 2022; Revised 20 Mar, 2022; Accepted 22 Mar, 2022 © The author(s) 2022.

Published with open access at [www.questjournals.org](http://www.questjournals.org)

## I. INTRODUCTION

"History has never written their story of facing impossible odds to fight, with their lifeblood, to the very bitter end, for survival". - Shaktipada Rajguru (*Dandak Theke Marichjhapi, 2018*).

Movement of people from one territory to another has always existed in history. In contemporary times, especially after the second World War, international migration has been linked to increasingly complex national policies that are aimed at regulating and controlling migration. Human migration where there is permanent change of residence by an individual or a group has taken new dimensions today. There has been dispersion of population across the globe who once shared same ethnic and cultural identities. Today, territorial identity has taken precedence over cultural identity. Even though identities can be shared across borders, it is the territory that defines real identity.

## THEORETICAL STRANDS

Meso theories (*Massey, 1990*) rejects the macro aspects of migration such as push and pull factors and instead focuses on a complex system of linkages between states. Migratory movements (*Faist, 1997*) are now often connected to prior standing links. Social relations and social capital in households, neighbourhoods, communities and more formal organisations help migrants in the migration decision and adaptation process, so they are both a resource and an integrating device. Migration from East Bengal to West Bengal after birth of Bangladesh was primarily due to cultural linkages between the two countries.

Neo Classical Theories (*Sjaastad, 1962; Todaro, 1969*) assert that people immigrate from places where there is labour surplus and low wages to places where there is labour scarcity and high wages. However, involuntary displacement and forceful emigration has been the trend after the second World War. These types of immigration come with severe consequences on humanity.

## **MARICHJHAPI MASSACRE: INSIGHTS FROM SUNDARBANS**

One such event was in the late 1970s in the islands of Sundarbans. Refugee crisis floated the geopolitics of India and new born Bangladesh. It was then the opposition Left Front in West Bengal had promised the migrants from East Bengal a better life and employment in the new territory. The population comprised mostly lower caste Hindus who feared persecution in Bangladesh developed a ray of hope after the promise of a meaningful life, if voted to power. After coming to power, the Government of West Bengal did not fulfil the promise and instead started treating the migrants as encroachers in Sundarbans. This was followed by a widespread massacre of the innocent and unarmed inhabitants of Marichjhapi. Bodies were mercilessly thrown into the sea. Government claimed it was a Reserve Forest but judicial enquiry later stated that it was not a protected area at the time of massacre. The Central Government led by Moraji Desai intervened and people of Marichjhapi were sent to refugee camps in *Dandakaranya*, a place which was no less than the concentration camps for Jews in Nazi Germany. Atrocities of camp supervisors made their lives beyond miserable (Halder, 2019). A couple of them escaped and returned to Sundarbans but they were suppressed with all kind of administrative and police brutalities. There was an attempt of whole physical blockade to the island of Marichjhapi.

Idea of ‘welfare state’, dream shown to them of better life opportunity was blown away by the political representatives of the Left Front. There was blatant disregard of fundamental legal and human principles. Later, there was an economic blockade to Marichjhapi. Life was miserable and beyond imagination, says a survivor in interview with Deep Halder, 2019. People died of starvation and with increasing unknown diseases. Islanders became easy prey of tigers (Jalais, 2004). Many chose death and committed suicide (Mazumdar, 2017). Committing suicide gave them illusion of liberty the only thing people could control (The Jewish Writings). Hannah Arendt wrote “*Perhaps the philosophers are right who teaches that suicide is the last and supreme guarantee of human freedom*”. This was the reality of Marichjhapi.

As noted by a journalist in the Bengali paper *Jugantar*:

*“The refugees of Dandakaranya are men of the lowest stratum of society. They are mainly cultivators, fishermen, day-labourers, artisans, the exploited mass of the society. So long as the state machinery will remain in the hands of the upper class elite, the poor, the helpless, the beggar, the refugees will continue to be victimised”.*

Today, survivors of the bloodshed reside in an area called *Pather Sesh* (End of the road) in South Kolkata. Jalais mentions that they are being called as “*The Untouchable Refugees*”. Some were forced to go back to Dandakaranya. Perhaps, this was one of the most inhumane faces of the Left Front of West Bengal. They were the ones who advocated community living, a casteless and classless society. However, agenda setters themselves became perpetrators of violence. “*Had we been from upper castes, our fate would possibly have been different*”, says a survivor (Halder, 2019). From immigrants, they are merely reduced as unwanted refugees. They are one of the living examples of marginalised sections of our society (Mallick, 1999).

## **II. CONCLUSION**

Collective Conscience, as believed by most of the sociologists was buried under the salty mud of Marichjhapi. Justice is a faraway dream for the handful of survivors. Today, their life is a great psychological portrait of what it means to be a wanderer and forced to be one away from home forever. Arendt argued that it does not matter if we call such violence as terrorism or massacre but they clearly have severe consequences upon humanity. The fundamental force that drives a human being is the will to survive. Just like the Jews, it was similar for the people of Marichjhapi to strip themselves of their identities. It was indeed a collective failure of the system, people, journalism and most importantly, humanity. Governments come and go. Their hope for living a decent standard life is still far ahead. Indian Government has come up with Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 in order to give citizenship to the victims of religious persecution and to the ones who fear religious persecution. However, Marichjhapi Migrants’ fate will only be decided with time.

“*We must not forget that we are all human beings*”, Arendt.

## **References:**

- [1]. Arendt, Hannah, ‘*The Jewish Writings*’, We Refugees, Schocken Books, New York, 1943.
- [2]. Haas, Hein de, ‘*Migration and Development: A Theoretical Perspective*’, International Migration Institute, University of Oxford, 2008.
- [3]. Halder, Deep, ‘*Blood Island: An Oral History of The Marichjhapi Massacre*’, Harper Collins, 2019.
- [4]. Jalais, Annu, ‘*Dwelling on Morichjhapi: When Tigers Became “Citizens”*’, Refugees
- [5]. “*Tiger-Food*”, Economic and Political Weekly, 23 April, 2005.
- [6]. Jalais, Annu, *Forest of Tigers: People, Politics and Environment in Sundarbans*, Routledge, 2010.

- [7]. Mullick, Ross, Refugee Settlement in Forest Reserves: *West Bengal Policy Reversal and Marichjhapi Massacre*, *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol 58, No. 1 (February, 1999), p.p. 104-125, Association of Asian studies.
- [8]. <https://youth-time.eu/we-refugees-an-enlightening-essay-by-hannah-arendt>.
- [9]. O'Reilly, Karen, '*International Migration and Social Theory*' (Themes in Social Theory), 2012.