

## Morichjhanpi Revisited

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[30 years from the Morichjhanpi massacre, the interest in the incident is growing. This is indeed a shocking but important incident in the political history of Bengal. Firstly it exposed the class and caste bias of the Bengal intelligentsia, they largely kept quiet to this horrifying genocide of refugees, majorly namasudras. And secondly it should have right then made it very clear the attitude of CPI(M), mainly their intolerance of anything positive happening without them, beyond them. Right then Morichjhanpi should have made clear to everyone that CPI(M) was never a party that could have taken a positive path and the side of the 'have-nots'.]

In the 1960s and 1970s (especially after the Bangladesh war of independence in 1971, Mujibur Rahman's assassination in 1975 and Zia-ur-Rahman's coming to power) communal agitations started to hereafter be directed against the poorest and low caste Hindus who had remained in East Bengal. They now sought refuge in West Bengal. Unlike their richer counterparts, who were backed by family and caste connections, many of these poorer migrants did not find a way of living in Kolkata and were sent to various inhospitable and infertile areas—most infamous amongst them being Dandakaranya, a semi-arid and rocky place in east-central India which included part of Orissa, and former Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh, now in present-day Chhattisgarh—thus an area entirely removed, both culturally and physically, from the refugees' known world. The opposition, denounced the Congress' attempts to evict the refugees from West Bengal and promised that when they came to power they would settle the refugees in West Bengal; and that this would, in all probability, be on one of the islands of the Sundarbans.

Many refugees, especially those from Khulna, had preferred settling in the inhabited islands of the Sundarbans – where they had erstwhile neighbours and relatives who had come from Khulna to clear the forests in the West Bengal part of the Sundarbans during the early part of the century – rather than go to the totally alien area of Dandakaranya. In 1975, many of those who had been sent to these camps started to move to a sand band called the Morich chak which was part of Morichjhanpi island in the Gosaba police station. It was thought to be possible to settle 16,000 families there, another 30,000 refugees in nearby Dattapasur, and in other Sundarbans places that had 'cultivable waste land'.

However, in their repeated attempts to settle there they were brutally evicted from the various train stations where they congregated on their way to West Bengal, were starved of water and food whilst in Morichjhanpi, and finally were even shot at before being brutally evicted from there.

The growing polarisation of West Bengal and East Bengal as separate 'homelands' for Hindus and Muslims respectively, affected most the lower caste, poor, rural population, especially of lower Bengal who were not divided so much along religious lines as along the cultural and economic divide of bhadralok/nimnborner or 'nimnborger lok'. The contending elements in being both 'Bengali' and 'Muslim' has often been addressed, however, the tension that exists when one is 'Bengali' but not a bhadralok has been less studied and needs to be recognised to comprehend why the islanders believed that they had become 'just tiger-food' for Kolkata's bhadralok. Though there has been a growing emphasis – especially following the publication of Ranajit

Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983) and subsequently in the Subaltern Studies series – on rural communities' consciousness through the study of rural movements in colonial Bengal, but as Das Gupta argues, these studies focus overwhelmingly on the religious discourse of the *nimnobarger lok*, especially in relation to resistance. While understanding religion is important, privileging it over all else distracts from the equally important economic and political spheres, and from alternative, less well known, cultural spheres. In this case the framing of community consciousness was not so much undertaken through the valorisation of religion but through a divide along caste/class which was expressed through local narratives on Morichjhanpi and tigers turning man-eaters. Here, through the rejection of the tiger as an animal one needs to be proud of due to its status as 'national animal' (of both Bangladesh and India), the islanders' narratives of tigers highlighted their perceptions of an unjust history. What this paper attempts to underscore is how the Sundarbans islanders internalised the injustice they felt had been levelled at the poorer refugees' claims for settlement in West Bengal and why they thought their request had been trivialised. It was told that the main reason why tigers had become man-eaters could be traced to the violent events of Morichjhanpi. Many islanders explained that they and tigers had lived in a sort of idyllic relationship prior to the events of Morichjhanpi. After Morichjhanpi, they said, tigers had started preying on humans. This sudden development of their man-eating trait was believed to have been caused by two factors. One was the defiling of the Sundarbans forest due to government violence, the second was because of the stress which had been put thereafter on the superiority of tigers in relation to the inhabitants of the Sundarbans. The brutality and rhetoric with which the refugees had been chased away, coupled with measures for safeguarding tigers which the government initiated soon after the events of Morichjhanpi, had, explained the villagers, gradually made tigers 'self-important'. With this increased conviction of their self-worth, tigers had grown to see poorer people as 'tiger-food'. The anthropo-morphisation of tigers in relation to the villagers' history is no less intriguing. The essence of one's 'bhadra' identity is often revealed through one's romanticised vision of nature, in this case of the Sundarbans—which literally means 'beautiful forest'—and of wildlife—here of the Royal Bengal tiger.

Bhadralok sensitivity to the Royal Bengal tiger with its association to both the regal and colonial images of hunting as well as to its current position as national animal has often been deployed to mark the urgency of having the Sundarbans named a World Heritage Site and prime tiger area. But the anthropomorphisation of tigers into that of a 'bhadra' symbol of national animal was questioned by the islanders through their presentation of another image of the tiger. Shrugging off the colonial and national drape off this bhadra tiger, it portrayed the animal as one whose gentle inoffensive nature was irretrievably transformed into that of a man-eater following the bloody events of Morichjhanpi. Highlighting this transformation of their tiger was a way, for the villagers, of reclaiming the forgotten pages of a history which had relegated them to oblivion, an injustice they felt they had been done by the urbanised elite who believed tigers were more precious than them, the *nimnobarner* or *nimnobarger lok*.

Brutal Evacuation of Refugees from Morichjhanpi in 1977, when the Left Front came to power, they found their refugee supporters had taken them at their word and sold their belongings and land to return to West Bengal. In all, 1,50,000 refugees arrived from Dandakaranya expecting the government to honour its word. Fearing that an influx of refugees might jeopardise the prospects of the state's economic recovery, the government started to forcibly send them back. Many refugees however managed to escape to various places inside West Bengal, one of these being the Sundarbans where they had family and where they would be able to survive by working as fishers. From the month of May the same year about 30,000 SC refugees, under the leadership of Satish Mandal, president of the *Udbastu Unnayansil Samity*, a former close associate of the Communist Party's refugee programme, sailed to Morichjhanpi and set up a settlement there. Morich-jhanpi, an island in the northern-most forested part of the West Bengal Sundarbans, had been cleared in 1975 and its mangrove vegetation replaced by a governmental programme of coconut and tamarisk plantation to increase state revenue. However, though this was not an island covered in mangrove forest, the state government was in no mood to tolerate such a settlement. It stated that the refugees were 'in unauthorised occupation of Morichjhanpi which is a part of the Sundarbans government reserve forest violating thereby the Forest Acts' and that refugees had come 'with the intention of settling there permanently thereby disturbing the existing and potential forest wealth and also creating ecological imbalance'.

The government placed primacy on ecology, but this argument, believed the villagers, was more to legitimise their ejection from Morichjhanpi in the eyes of the Kolkata bhadralok. The argument that this might be a precedent for an unmanageable refugee influx from Bangladesh was also heatedly argued as baseless. Indeed, as Ross Mallick argues, by then, the last wave of East Bengali migrants had been forcefully driven out of the state and those who would have settled in Morichjhanpi would not have been a financial liability for the state government. The refugees from Dandakaranya were joined by people from the villages of the adjoining Sundarbans islands of Satjelia, Kumirmari, Puinjali and Jharkhali. Many islanders, being the descendants of immigrants from Khulna in East Bengal brought by the British even as late as the 1930s and 1940s to reclaim the forest, identified with the refugees. A lot of them also shared close blood ties with the refugees, ties reignited through visits and gifts of paddy and vegetables. Young landless couples were urged to settle with the Morichjhanpi dwellers; their intimate knowledge of that part of the forest and generous lending of boats and dinghies were further recompensed by the refugees' eagerness that they too settle in Morichjhanpi to strengthen their case. When narrating their memories, if some of the islanders evoked their dismay at finding their ponds emptied of water overnight due to the refugees' initial dependence on the adjoining islands' pond water for their survival, most islanders also drew on memories of fraternal bonding. Morichjhanpi island, being 125 square miles, was so big that the refugees were keen that the islanders join them so as to have 'hands raise bunds and voices carry our pleas to Kolkata'; to help improve the dire economic situation of the Sundarbans region as a whole rather than squabble over land which, being neither fertile nor theirs to distribute, was not worth fighting over.

The settlers—both refugees as well as islanders who had come from the adjoining villages, initially built some makeshift huts along the cultivated area

of the island, beneath the government's coconut and tamarisk trees. Most of them survived by working as crab and fish collectors in the forest, and with the help of the islanders, by selling their products in the nearby villages. In the memories of their time there, the Sundarbans islanders often underlined the fraternal bonding they shared with the refugees and their immense relief to have finally come across vocal leaders. In contrast to the ruling elite of their villages, composed essentially of large landowners who aspired to migrate towards Kolkata, they saw the East Bengali leaders as more apt to represent them. They explained that this was because they were poor, rural, and low caste and hence not afraid to take up manual work, such as fishing, and knew, through the twists of fate what it was like to fight for their rights. As a whole, the refugees were looked up to by the Sundarbans islanders of the islands adjoining that of Morichjhapi because they were better educated and more articulate than themselves and because, having lost everything, they were seen as having the moral courage to face the Kolkata ruling class with their rural concerns.

The islanders often expressed their awe at the way the East Bengali refugees rapidly established Morichjhanpi as one of the best-developed islands of the Sundarbans—within a few months tube-wells had been dug, a viable fishing industry, saltpans, dispensaries and schools established, and this contrasted lamentably with the islands they came from, where many of these facilities were, and are, still lacking. Stories abounded about the spirit of bonhomie and solidarity between refugees and islanders whose similar experiences of marginalisation brought them together to bond over a common cause which was to fight for a niche for themselves; this would become a metaphor for the reclamation of 'voice' in the new West Bengal. The villagers explained the refugees' bid to stay on in Morichjhanpi as a dignified attempt to forge a new respectable identity for themselves as well as a bid to reclaim a portion of the West Bengali political rostrum by the poorest and most marginalised. They had also hoped that this would be taken up by the government as an opportunity to absolve itself of the wrong it had done to the poorer refugees by sending them away from West Bengal. Unrepentant, and despite this display of self-help and cooperative spirit, the government persisted in its effort to clear Morichjhanpi of the settlers.

On the January 31, 1979 the police opened fire killing 36 persons. The media started to underscore the plight of the refugees of Morichjhanpi and wrote in positive terms about the progress they were making in their rehabilitation efforts. Photographs were published in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* of the February 8, 1979 and the opposition members in the state assembly staged a walkout in protest of the government's methods of treating them. Fearing more backlash, and seeing the public growing warm towards the refugees' cause, the chief minister declared Morichjhanpi out of bounds for journalists and condemned their reports saying that these contributed to the refugees' militancy and self-importance and instead suggested that the press should support their eviction on the grounds of national interest. After the failure of the economic blockade (announced on January 26—an ironical twist to Republic Day!) in May the same year, the government started forcible evacuation. Thirty police launches encircled the island thereby depriving the settlers of food and water; they were also tear-gassed, their huts razed, their boats sunk, their fisheries and tube-wells destroyed, and those who tried to

cross the river were shot at. To fetch water, the settlers had now to venture after dark and deep into the forested portion of the island and forced to eat wild grass. Several hundred men, women and children were believed to have died during that time and their bodies thrown in the river.

The Calcutta High Court ordered a two-week lifting of the ban but this was not properly implemented. Based on Sikar (1982) and Biswas' (1982) pieces, Ross Mallick estimates that in all 4,128 families who had come from Dandakaranya to find a place in West Bengal perished of cholera, starvation, disease, exhaustion, in transit while sent back to their camps, by drowning when their boats were scuttled by the police or shot to death in Kashipur, Kumirmari, and Morichjhanpi by police firings. How many of these deaths actually occurred in Morichjhanpi people will never know. However, what everybody knows, is that no criminal charges were laid against any of the officials or politicians involved. Even then prime minister Morarji Desai, wishing to maintain the support of the Communists for his government, decided not to pursue the matter. Many refugees and villagers had voted for the government coalition based on their stated commitment to resettling the refugees in West Bengal. The refugees saw the brutality of the government as one that had been possible because it was backed by the bhadralok who perceived the refugees and the Sundarbans islanders as lesser beings who came behind tigers in their classificatory scheme of importance. [abridged] [Source : Sanhati]