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NPTEL ONLINE
CERTIFICATION COURSE

Partition of India in Print Media and Cinema

LECTURE 43 - REFUGEE, DESH AND NATION

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HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



Continued.....

Refugee experiences at Dandakaranya

- The novel encompasses the significant aspects of the Dandakaranya project.
- The fact that the larger plan did not take into account the ground realities is explicated in the very opening lines of the text.
- The resettlement plan meant clearing of vast primeval forests, building of roads, schools and hospitals and a new life for hundreds of men and women.
- It also meant a clash between the new arrivals and the local populace: a peasant-tribal confrontation over land. The novel explicitly sets out this simmering discontent.



The Marichjhapi Episode

- In the history of refugee rehabilitation in West Bengal, **Marichjhapi** is almost a forgotten chapter. Few people have written about it; discussions about it by historians have also been negligible.
- The reason for this can be seen in the presence of a large percentage of marginal communities and lower castes among the refugees who came to Marichjhapi for whom neither the Congress government at the Centre nor the urban middle class of Calcutta had any sympathy. When a Communist government came to power in West Bengal, the status-quo was maintained.
- In 1977, with the Left Front government in power, the refugees who had been rehabilitated in Dandakaranya became hopeful that the new popular government who had always espoused the refugee cause would now help them come back to West Bengal.

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- During the implementation and failure of the Dandakaranya Project, the then Leftist opposition leaders campaigning against the Congress government, such as Jyoti Basu, Kironmoy Nanda, Ram Chatterjee, and the Refugee Development Association's President Satish Mandal, had promised to resettle the poor Dalit refugees in the Sunderban areas of West Bengal, if they came to power.
- The Left Front Minister Ram Chatterjee visited the refugee camps at Dandak several times and was widely reported to have encouraged the refugees to settle in the Sunderbans, which had been a long-held Left demand (Sengupta, 116).
- However, when the Dalits actually succeeded in occupying the Marichjhanpi area of Sunderbans, the Communist Party, which had by then formed government, betrayed its former pro-proletarian image and instead uprooted Dalits.

Left and it's changed approach

- Left Front policies had changed under the altered circumstances of governance. The new Left Front government in West Bengal, which had come to power with the refugee vote, now urged these people to go back to Dandakaranya, refusing to entertain their demand of settling in West Bengal.
- The Left government's self-perpetuation and reproduction of power through violence unveiled its partisan stance and upper-caste attitudes.

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- “Dandakaranya Theke Firey Asha Udbastu der Proti Mukhyomontrir Abedan” (“Chief Minister’s Petition to the Dandakaranya Returnee Refugees”, April 11, 1978) - Jyoti Basu’s speech, circulated as leaflets by the Government of West Bengal, reverted the previous promises, asking the Dandakaranya-returned refugees to retrace to the Malkangiri areas, which would be developed in the near future (*Chhinna Desh* 41).
- Many refugees were sent back, but around 10,000 Namasudra refugee families under the leadership of Satish Mandal, President of the Udbastu Unnayanshil Samiti, set sail and settled in Marichjhapi.

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- The government declared Marichjhapi as a reserve forest and the refugees as violating the Forest Acts, through destroying “the existing and potential forest wealth and also creating ecological imbalance”.
- Testimonials by Nirmalkanti Dhali and Radhikaranjan Biswas attest to the brutality instigated by the Communist government, who encouraged the police force to carry out random massacres of Dalits and sabotage their lives and property. The Communist government falsely indicted them for offences like collusion with foreign spies, firearm training activities, smuggling of national treasure and destruction of conserved forest property.

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- Through the months of March and April 1978, families sold their belongings and left Dandakaranya.
- “How many days did we eat a full meal in Dandak? We spent twenty years like that. Can’t we manage three months more? But I am no longer a refugee, my bastuhara title is at an end”, said the 55-year-old Ratish Mondol who left for Marichjhapi to begin a new life (Sengupta, 116).
- The Revolutionary Socialist Party (R.S.P.), a Marxist-Leninist faction of the Left-wing and supposed “owner” of Marichjhanpi, would ominously patrol the area.

Economic blockade and the end of Marichjhapi

- On 26 January 1979, government-sponsored goons enacted absolute economic and food blockade of the island to force the settlers to go back. Police launches surrounded the island; the refugees were tear-gassed, their huts, fisheries and tube-wells destroyed. Those who tried to cross the river in makeshift boats were shot at.
- The refugees, armed with carpentry tools and makeshift bows and arrows, were no match for the government forces. The community was tear-gassed, huts were razed, and fisheries and tube wells were destroyed, in an attempt to deprive the refugees of food and water.
- Many died of starvation, and many were killed by police firing. A conservative estimate gave the dead as several hundred men, women and children, who died either through starvation or were shot at and their bodies thrown into the river.

Economic blockade and the end of Marichjhapi

- A three-member committee, including Prasannabhai Mehta, Lakshminarayan Pande and Mangaldeo Visharad visited Marichjhanpi for inspection on March 22, 1979. However, the West Bengal government's agents informed them that the deaths were caused by starvation and dearth of medication.
- Subsequently, the report produced to Prime Minister Morarji Desai in the 1980s had no problematic remarks about the Marichjhanpi incident, and the Centre too, relying on Left Government's management, refrained from any kind of strong decision.
- Furthermore, in order to diminish the impact of the carnage before public eyes, popular newspapers like *The Statesman* (English and Bengali) took up the role of allaying the charges that were inflicted on the Left government. The Marichjhanpi incident, thus, confirms the ultimate *bhadralok* orientation of the reigning CPI-M (Communist Party of India-Marxist).

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- Citing in the context of the Marichjhanpi incident (1978), a correspondent observes that the Communist government's ambition for 25% West Bengali Muslim votes, and targets for peaceable relationships with Bangladesh and the working classes of Orissa, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, were accomplished through sacrificing the prospects of Bengali Dalit refugees.
- This is despite the fact that the Marichjhanpi refugees, most of whom belonged to impoverished Dalit sections, had lent long-term inputs in making “rulers” out of the “Leftist fugitives,” by constantly supplying man-force to the party's early barricades and civil disobediences, such as the All Bengal Teachers' Association movement (1954), the anti-merger movement (1956) and a series of food movements.

Space and Caste-Class Politics

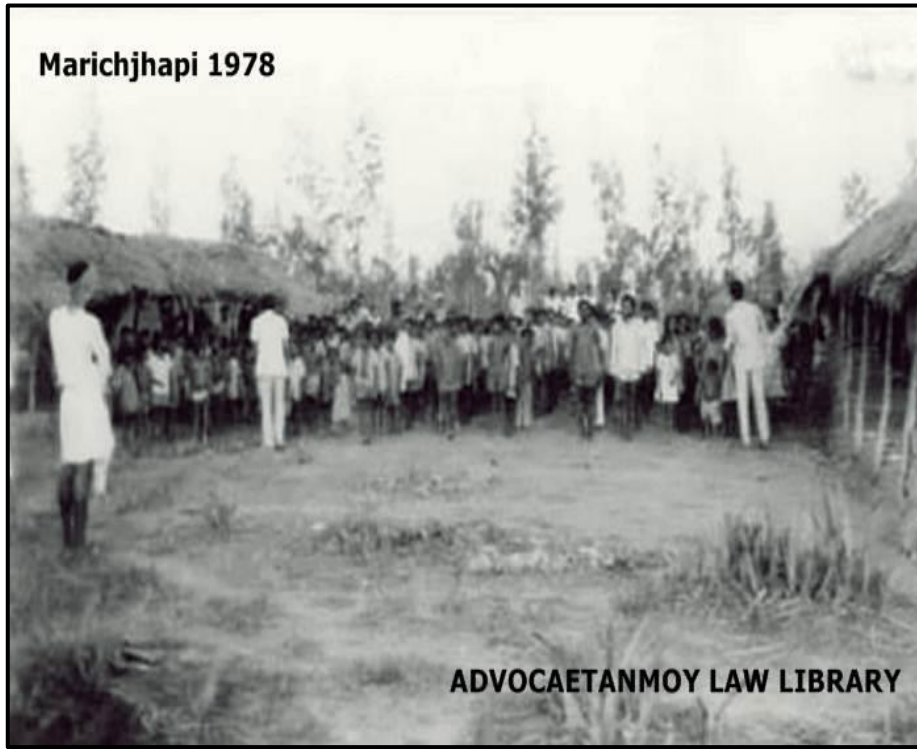
Manoranjan Byapari:

“The Bengal that had space available for *bhadralok* refugees, where lakhs of people entered from other regions every year and got put up, where lakhs of acres of demesne were under the government’s hold, could not dole out one *katha* of land to these people even then, even now...In August 11 1958, the U.C.R.C., a collaborated organization formed by the Communist Party and the Forward Bloc, had petitioned before Chief Minister Dr. Bidhan Chandra Ray to develop 62.5 square mile areas of the Sunderban lands and rehabilitate 6,875 refugee families there, as well as re-establish jobs for 3,300 families based on the fish *bheris* in 12,000 acres of lands. At a later stage, the Chief Minister himself had asserted that the government had about 5000 *bighas* of land in Marichjhanpi under the Sandeshkhali police station. But those lands could not be entitled to these people, because they were not the Chatterjee-Mukherjee-Banerjees, or the Ghosh-Bose-Guha-Mitras, towards whom the leaders were ever sympathetic; these were the Biswas-Byapari-Mandal-Bala-Mistris. Dalits, *chhotoloks* (“Ananta Ratir Chandal” 214, 216, translation mine).”



The Marichjhapi Episode

Marichjhapi 1978



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- The Indian government dissimilarly treated its refugees, who belonged to different class and caste groups. As they came at different phases of migration, the government gave separate designation for each group, depending on their phase of arrival in India.
- Archit Basu Guha-Choudhury, Ian Talbot and Gurharpal Singh note the periodic nature of displacement in Eastern India, where the influx of refugee migration kept happening long after Partition.
- A major difference in handling Punjab and Bengal Partition was that while in the former case there was a mutual agreement of virtual exchange of population, in the latter, the Centre took measures to limit the transfer of population. According to Anasua Basu Raychaudhury, migration among East Bengalis from East Pakistan to West Bengal was primarily shaped by three basic imperatives: *dhan* (wealth/property), *maan* (honour/prestige) and *praan* (life).

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- The watershed of 1971 signalled the end of the era of the citizen-refugee in India.
- Unlike their predecessors, Hindu and Buddhist minorities who migrated to India from Pakistan after March 1971 were no longer treated as putative citizens. They were marked as foreigners and temporary sojourners.
- Future migrants from Bangladesh came to be characterised as *anuprobeshkari* or infiltrators in West Bengal. However, the transformation of the citizen-refugee, variously and interchangeably categorised as migrants, refugees and displaced persons since 1947, to the Bangladeshi ‘infiltrator’ was not a sudden affair.

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- The regime of rehabilitation in West Bengal was not merely the product of a contestation between the government of West Bengal and East Bengali refugees.
- The government of India played a crucial role in the evolution of this regime. West Bengal's success in adopting a policy that required the Dalit refugees to leave West Bengal in order to access rehabilitation would have been impossible without the active support of the central government (Sen 68).

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- The self-reliant refugees appealed to the state for recognition of their social eminence and advancement.
- The policy of self-rehabilitation inadvertently rewarded those who owned social capital and could manage on their own, rather than supporting those who really needed state help.
- Those left on the margins of the new citizenry symbolized the state's failure to design policies that would focus on the most needy and subaltern refugees.

Thank You

