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Exhuming the Untold Story: A Study of 'Marichjhapi Incident through Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract: *The incident of Marichjhapi has been shrouded in the veil of silence for over three decades. This silence is part of the violence that was perpetrated by the Communist government of West Bengal on some 25,000 destitute refugees on May 14, 1979. Within a single night 36 people were shot dead, huts were razed, women raped, thousands arrested, and fisheries were destroyed. Everything was over in a single night. What is more horrifying, is the fact, that the Communist government which is at the helm of the affairs in the state of West Bengal for more than thirty years ensured that the Bengali intelligentsia remain silent about that night of horror. Censorship was so tight that no article or academic deliverance took place on this incident of Marichjhapi since 25th July 1979 when the first part of an article about the incident of Marichjhapi got published in Jugantar (a reputed Bengali Journal); the second part of that article never came out. Thus the tales of horror were strangled in the claustrophobic ambience of silence. It was only during the Nandigram agitation where the violence was believed to be state sponsored that the spectre of Marichjhapi rose from its grave to remind us of those horrifying days of 1979. Thus it does not appear to be strange when we find even creative writers have remained tight-lipped on this Marichjhapi massacre. Amitav Ghosh explores and exhumes this unheard tale of violence from the grave of silence through his novel The Hungry Tide. He narrates those haunting days of 1979 through the personal diary of Nirmal (the Uncle of the protagonist Kanai). It is an excellent example when the personal memoirs comes into play and fill up the voids of the nationalist mainstream history. The proposed paper would thus focus and analyze the 'fables of fear' that surrounds the incident of Marichjhapi through Amitava Ghosh's The Hungry Tide.*

Keywords: Marichjhapi, Refugee studies, Migration, Partition Studies

I. INTRODUCTION

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l-š² qu l¡P¡ j¡¢V

L¡-s e¡ -LE l¡
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p¡a¢V Q¡yf¡ p¡a¢V N¡-R
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W¡L¥j¡l T¥¢m zz (W¡L¥j¡l T¥¢m, p¤¤i¡o j¤-M¡f¡dÉ¡u)

(Courtsey: Madhumoy Pal, Marichjhapi: Chinna Desh Chinna Itihaas)

Screeching dhols fell silent
The earth turned incarnadine

Nobody spoke a word
All- sons of God

Seven champaks in seven trees
Only sister Parul stands nigh

Thus goes to Dandak
Dharmaraj's[ii] scepter
These tales fill up
Thakumar Jhuli.[iii] (trans.- Durbadal Bhattacharya)

There is a folk tale that a stepmother once cut off the tongue of a witness to her wrongdoing (aparadh) and buried it deep in the ground. But hardly a year passed, a tree sprang out of the earth. Each leaf was a tongue that whispered the tale of secret wrongdoing to the winds. When open and unrestricted reporting is stopped, the million tongues of rumour (gujob) begin to rustle in the breeze. Amitava Ghosh in his novel *The Hungry Tide*, defiles the 'holy history of a holy nation' by narrating the heroics of few thousand refugees on an barren island in the tide country and how they were mercilessly robbed of their dreams to rebuild their lives on the muddy shores. He exhumes the horrifying history of Marichjhapi from its grave to prevent it from getting lost in the abyss of oblivion.

Gyanendra Pandey in his article "The Prose of Otherness" states that there is a sense in which all histories since the 19th century have been national histories. As such they have tended to wipe out many of the signs of struggle and violence that marked the way to their own success. The violence involved in making all national histories, like nations, appear natural – a necessary part of the task of nation building. The violence perpetrated by the State is presumed to be legitimate – designated by special terms such as 'war', 'policing', 'counterinsurgency operation'. If the violence of the state is organized, carefully controlled (therefore, minimal) and of course legitimate, then the violence of the people is polar opposite, it is chaotic, uncontrolled, excessive and always illegitimate. The violence of the state always becomes invisible in the writing. Even after the proper coverage by the media, protests of students and political groups, there was lack of any substantial coverage, deliverance or research on the Marichjhapi massacre. Only a handful of people namely, Ross Mallick, Nilanjana Chatterjee, Anu Jalai, Jagadish Chandra Mondal, and recently Madhumay Pal have produced some academic writings on it. Among creative writers other than Amitav Ghosh, Marichjhapi figures in one of Sunil Gangopadhyay's novel[iv]. After the Marichjhapi massacre, the Bengali daily Jugantar published the first part of an article by Pannalal Dasgupta; immediately after the publication of the article, the manuscripts and proofs of the rest three parts of that article were confiscated by the CPI(M) union of Jugantar and Amritbazar Patrika. The articles were submitted to the editor of CPI(M) party, Mr. Pramod Dasgupta. The owner of the Jugantar, Mr. Tarunkanti Ghosh was warned that if the paper makes a further attempt to publish articles by Pannalal Dasgupta, then none of the advertisements on the behalf of the government of West Bengal would appear in Jugantar and Amritbazaar Patrika. In 2002, a review on the book "Marichjhapi: Naisabder Antarale" was published in a tri-monthly Bengali journal "*Pustakmela"*, but immediately after formal release of that journal all the copies were confiscated . The journal resurfaced in the market with another essay in its place. Why such a censorship? Isn't it a conspiracy to strangle the maligned history with a web of silence?

In his edited book *Marichjhapi – Chinno Desh, Chinno Itihas*, Madhumay Pal has included an article by Amiya Kumar Samanta, one of the police officers, who was involved in the Marichjhapi operations. Samanta in his essay on Marichjhapi alleges, Amitav Ghosh has to depend on half-cooked, politically motivated crooked facts to write a novel.

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He argues that Ghosh's version of history on Marichjhapi is nothing but a figment of imagination. He dismisses the versions provided by Jagdish Chandra Mandal, Ross Mallick as concocted stories hatched under the provocation of some unscrupulous persons and organisations. The act of dismissing a novel and other researches that deviate from the normal course of nationalist discourse as 'figment of imagination', 'poor research', 'maligned intentions' 'concocted stories' by the agencies of the state is indicative of the fact that how 'the history' of the nation state tries to maintain a continuum, how the 'aberrations', 'irregularities' are not the part of the tradition the 'holy state', it belongs to the 'other'.

Marichjhapi and countless other Marichjhapis are the resultant of the catastrophic event of 1947 when India was truncated into two nations among genocidal violence. Millions were immediately rendered homeless, the home, they considered to be their own was no more theirs. They suddenly became the other, the foreign element in their own land. And the irony is, the place where they are displaced or forced to migrate, there also they are considered as outsiders, "saranarthi" or refugees. They already knew "by instinct/ we're not comfortably at home/ in our translated world." (Ghosh 206) Robbed of their home and hearth, a terrified and demoralised generation crossed the border. The nature of migration in East and West is different – in West, the exodus was huge and took place in earlier years of partition. Whereas in East, migration was not restricted to those three years, but over the years they continued to pour in, to use the words of Sunil Gangopadhyay, "They trickled in slowly, like rows of ants coming down the wall of the deserted house in the anticipation of an earthquake." (Gangopadhyay 301)

In 1956-57, a high level committee was set up for the feasibility of the scheme of land colonisation outside Bengal for refugee rehabilitation. In June, 1957 the recommendations of the committee were accepted by the National Development Council. As a result, a special governing agency called the DDA project or Dandakaranya Development Authority was set up in 1958. Dandakaranya, an area of 202,020 sq. kms in Koratpur and Kalahandi district of Orissa and Bastar district of Madhya Pradesh (now Chattisgarh) lies in a low plateau and is thickly forested. Though rich in forest resources and minerals, it has remained isolated due to poor accessibility and self sufficient nature of the tribal people. Rainfall is mainly confined within the 100 days from June to September. Due to low aridity, the land was hardly suitable for growing any sustainable crops. Above all the land was not at all fit for the production of paddy. It was particularly distressing for the East Bengal refugees of whom 97% were recorded as agriculturist, as paddy culture not only represented a mode of sustenance but an entire way of life (Kudaisya, 1996). Problems were severe in Kurud and Mana camp. Severe problems of drinking water, land unfit for cultivation, frequent clashes with the tribals forced the refugees to depend on the ration provided by the Government. They were also denied employment in those states. The situation deteriorated during the period of 1971-1977. The lackadaisical attitude of the central and respective state governments forced the refugees to leave the camp over the period. Chatterjee in her unpublished thesis "Midnight's Unwanted Children" states that in 1978 when the Govt. of India published a report boasting of the achievements of DDA project in 20 years, in that same year around 14,388 families (around 1,20,000 people) deserted DDA between January to June and marched towards West Bengal with a dream to be rehabilitated there. They sold all their belongings at half a price to collect money for the journey. These groups of people were neither instigated nor were they 'lazy' Bengalis (as termed by the central government) – they were driven by hunger. It must be mentioned in this regard that most of the refugees rehabilitated in DDA were of *namasudra* class or lower caste Hindus. The Government started persuading them that leaving the camp would be disastrous and the Government would do whatever it can to alleviate their pain. Paying no heed to its appeal they took on an arduous journey towards West Bengal in bus, rented trucks and rail. The Government resorted to blockade and started using force for returning the refugees to DDA. In one such case, on 21 July, 1978 in Kashipur, Burdwan, West Bengal, it was reported that when trucks arrived late in the night amidst heavy rain to take them to the station for the train to DDA, the refugees refused to go until the rain stopped. The police fired 15 rounds killing 8 refugees. The heavy handed measure appeared to take effect as the Government of West Bengal announced that 63,213 refugees have been 'repatriated'. But somehow around 45,000 people managed to cross the river to reach Marichjhapi.

The Marichjhapi incident in 1978-79 is a classic example regarding the inclusive and exclusive policy of the nation-state. In this post-colonial era, the nation-state assumes the theological status – it defines the centre as well as the margins; draws the line of demarcation between the legal and the illegal, the citizen and the refugee. During November, 1977 it was rumoured, a group of refugees in Dandyakaranya under the banner of Udbastu Unnayanshil Samiti and under the

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instigation by prominent left leader Ram Chatterjee, gave a cry, "Sunderban Chalo!" or "Onward to Sunderban". They marked 'Marichjhapi' as their destination. It lies south to an island named Kumirmari in Sunderban. It is a 53 km long and 13 km wide stretch of island in Sunderban region in West Bengal. The refugees set up a co-operative settlement in Marichjhapi. With their practical knowledge and entrepreneurship skills they not only managed to survive in terribly hostile conditions, but built a society that most developed of the society would be proud of. Within a span of only eight months they built fisheries, bakeries, boat factory, bidi factory, weaving factories and dykes to prevent tide from flooding the island. The salinity of the soil was deterrent for the growth of healthy crops, but the refugees were confident of diminishing the salinity of the soil that would be capable of yielding sufficient food to sustain the islanders. There were about 300 stalls on the island, a school for the children, sweet water resources. They systematically divided the plots among the dwellers; all the refugees were enlisted formally. Had he been alive, the Father of our Nation, Mahatma Gandhi would have been proud of these refugees who through their meagre means and effort created a 'swaraj' for themselves; a self-sufficient society. But as Gandhi's egalitarian ideas was done away with by the founding members of our nation, likely the achievements of these islanders met a violent death. The Government of West Bengal on 27 January 1979 resorted to economic blockade and prohibited all movements from the island. Under Forest Preservation Act it promulgated section 144 of Criminal Penal Code, making it illegal for five or more persons to move together at any point of time. When the islanders filed a petition at the Calcutta High Court, against the atrocities of Government, the court passed a judgement asking the Government to lift all kind of blockade. The Government primarily denied of any kind of blockade, be alone any economic blockade.[v] Supply of essential goods, even the supply of drinking water was stopped. Between January and May 1979 around 1000 refugees died out of starvation, suicide and police firing. On 14 and 15 May 1979, the Government evacuated the island ruthlessly. Researchers and activists like Ross Mallick, Atharbaki Biswas, Kamla Basu and others have claimed in their in articles, personal memoirs that around seventeen thousand people were killed in that operation and the bodies were dumped in the river to be washed out by the tide, as downstream there were no human settlements However officials figures, news paper reports thirty six people were killed in police firing, 128 were missing and 24 women were subjected to humiliating abuse. Ross Mullick further alleges, the government hired Muslim goons and the island was raided collectively by police, CPI(M) cadres and Muslim gangsters(as it was believed that Muslims would have less sympathy over the Hindu refugees). [vi]

Amitav Ghosh as a post-modern writer does not commit the folly of being assertive, rather in a non-committal tone, he takes refuge under the mystic ambience of Sunderban, to tell his tale of an lost generation. Sunderban, itself becomes the metaphor for that lost generation. The 'bhatir desh' as it is otherwise referred to, is 'a universe unto itself' (pp7, Ghosh), a universe which is utterly hostile to the human presence, determined to expel them or destroy them. Ghosh very subtly intertwines the histories, he weaves the lost history of the Ganges Dolphin (Irrawaddy) with the mythic history of this archipelago which again gets intertwined with the human history of Marichjhapi. The novel unravels with two of its principal characters Kanai and Piya waiting for a train to Canning. Kanai has been summoned by his *mashima*, Nilima, to take care of a diary that his uncle Nirmal has left for him. She was anticipating that there must have been few poems and short stories in it, which Kanai can obviously get published. But it was not so, as the diary, or rather it would be proper to call it a notebook, was the only testimony left narrating the dreams, aspirations of about 30,000 people. As Nirmal wrote in his notebook:

I am afraid because I know that after storm passes, the events that have preceded its coming will be forgotten. No one knows better than I how skilful the tide country is in silting over its past....I can make sure at least that what happened here leaves some trace, some hold upon memory of the world.
(Ghosh 69)

Ghosh through his novel *The Hungry Tide* want to stir the imagination of the world. The notebook of Nirmal that profanes history was found to be under threat – not only from human beings but also from the nature. Kanai finds the notebook wrapped carefully in a plastic, to prevent moisture entering the packet; but somehow it finds its way to dampen the notebook, the letters cramped, faded and ineligible – a visible sign that how nature tries to silt over its past. Here, literature not only limits itself to an entertaining medium but also acts as a metaphor. *The Hungry Tide* makes a serious endeavour to exhibit how history or rather histories get lost in the mire of human or natural conspiracies – but rumour,

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oral testimonies and personal memoir holds on to that history. And gradually histories become legend and legends get transformed into myth.

Squatter's colony or as it was more popularly known as the jabardakhal colony was not a novel/unprecedented phenomenon in history of West Bengal refugee rehabilitation programme. During the 50's and the 60's when the contemporary Congress Government failed to provide proper relief and rehabilitation for hundreds of thousands of refugees, these refugees under the leadership of the left parties forcibly occupied many public and private vacant marshy lands. What is more astonishing is that these left parties have always promised the refugees of their rehabilitation in West Bengal. The Left parties particularly CPI(M) headed an organized protest against the previous Congress government for driving out the Bengali refugees from the soil of Bengal. They demanded for their rehabilitation in West Bengal itself and they cited Sunderbans and other rural regions in Bengal as the sites for developing refugee colonies. Naturally when in 1977 the Left came to power riding on the votes of these refugees, the refugees who were perishing due to the neglect of central and state governments decided to move to West Bengal. They thought, the government would welcome them with a warm heart and hearth. The tide country which for others was 'vale of tears', for people like Kusum it 'was more precious than gold'. (Ghosh 216) But not even in their wildest of wild dreams they expected such a shabby and cruel treatment from the Government of poor, from the friend of the dispossessed. This is not the end of it. In the contemporary CPI (M) government there were ministers in the cabinet who had their roots in the squatter's colonies. So, naturally an enervating query comes forth regularly; why the government, which has been a long standing friend to the refugees, suddenly became so hostile to their demands. The then Chief Minister of West Bengal even went ahead to term these band of demoralised and dispossessed persons as terrorist, and revolutionaries. In his speech in the state Assembly on 9th February, 1979, the then Chief Minister of West Bengal, Jyoti Basu accused the refugees of violating Forest Preservation Act of India and they have developed their colony in the area of the reserve forest. They were indiscriminately cutting down trees, catching fish in the river and constructing illegal fisheries. He alleged that refugees intend to run a parallel govt. on the island. Under the instigation of the opposition parties they are hatching conspiracy against the present government. He even argued that the refugees were carrying on terrorist activities on the island, they were smuggling fire arms and ammunitions through the porous Indo-Bangladesh border[vii]. The question is why suddenly the tigers became more valuable than the human lives. Kusum during her conversation with Horen and Nirmal, broke down, when the duo came to visit her in the island after the government removed the economic blockade. She complains:

Sir, the worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here, helpless, and listen to the policemen making their announcements, hearing them say that our lives, our existence, was worth less than dirt or dust. "This island has to be saved for its trees; it has to be saved for its animals. It is a part of the reserve forest; it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people from around the world." Every day, sitting here with hunger gnawing at our bellies, we would listen to these words, over and over again. Who are these people, I wondered, who loves animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? Do they know what is being done in their names? Where do they live, these people, do they have children, do they have mothers, brothers? As I thought of these things it seemed to me that this whole world has become a place of animals, and our fault, our crime was that we are just human beings, trying to live as human beings always have, from the water and the soil. No human being could think this a crime unless they have forgotten that this is how humans have always lived – by fishing, by clearing land, and by planting the soil. (Ghosh 262)

In his essay "Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and Marichjhapi Massacre", Ross Mallick laments the fact that the WWF literature started to blame the poor for being the 'most direct threat to wildlife and wild lands'. Dr. Karan Singh, Chairman of the Project Tiger steering committee, was criticized for putting the interests of tiger ahead of people. The fact that a villager was prosecuted when he killed a tiger that attacked his companions, with his oar, raised the question of the relative value of human life. In the novel Nilima makes fun of the fact when she narrates that how goverment is digging sweet water ponds to prevent it from attacking human establishment, where majority of the people of the tide country goes thirsty.

The subalterns are mute, they are speechless and they are being spoken for. Thus often, their actions, rituals and festivals fail to carry any meaning with it, almost bordering to barbarism. Thus in the novel also, it is worth noting that Nirmal, Nilima, Kanai and Piya – all of them are outsiders. Even after spending quite a lot of years on the island, Nirmal and

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Nilima with all their repertoire of knowledge about tide country, fail to become one of them. To Nilima, the effort by the refugees of Marichjhapi didn't appeal to her philanthropic self. It is due to that very reason, when Horen, and Fakir joins a mob to kill a trapped tiger, it was utterly repulsive for Piya and Kanai. For Piya, Fokir and Horen immediately become representatives of some primitive race. She says, "I keep seeing it again and again – the people, the flames. It was like something from some other time – before recorded history." (Ghosh 300) She compares it with the Kurtzian 'horror' – a horrifying world where the light of the so called civilized world cannot reach. She fails to fathom the predicament of the poorest of the poor people in the world. When Kanai argues that in this part of the world people are killed by tigers every week, and all of that goes unremarked, unnoticed, unreported, it is so because the *babus* of the city, the mem of other countries are exonerated from facing the 'unnameable' terror, as people of this tide country refer to. Thus it seems the demarcating lines that separate the subalterns from the animals often fade out before the urbanely educated, enlightened '*Babus'*. In this context I presume that the dalits of Marichjhapi were valued less by the westernly educated intelligentsia and the Left government. It is worth noting that the incident of Marichjhapi survives through Nilima, Piya and Kanai – none of them are the indigenous people of the tide country. Their external gaze defines the history of the people of Marichjhapi and the history of the riverside dolphin. All the myth, legend and history of the tide country add to the vast knowledge repertoire of the civilized world. But, quite unsurprisingly the indigenous masses have no say in that history – they are the object of experimentation, analysis and pity. Thus during 1978-79, when the dalits, the most oppressed class of the society, dared to build a home for themselves, they were accused of running a parallel government in the island and hatching a conspiracy against the government. It is not only the killing of the people by the tigers, that go unnoticed, but also the killings of hundreds of dwellers of Marichjhapi and the torture and molestations of the dalit woman passed away uncontested. Mallick provides us with a shocking piece of information in this regard. When the Central Parliamentary Committee came to the island after the notorious economic blockade of 27 January, 1979, the leader of the island provided the committee with a list of people who died during that blockade. But the committee's report after the Marichjhapi massacre stated that there was no violence and violation of the rights of scheduled castes and tribes in West Bengal. The committee did not even bother to set up an enquiry on this issue. The secular ideals on which this great country was modelled upon has witnessed the violation of those ideals time and again.

Though Ghosh keeps an objective distance to critic the Marichjhapi massacre, but he never spares the intelligentsia of Bengal for being criminally silent. Thus for him Nirmal is the chosen one, who was forced to live a life of exile in the tide country for being true to his ideals. Ghosh entrusts him for narrating the saga of a lost generation:

"This is the time for what can be said. Here
is its country. Speak and testify . . ." (Ghosh 275)

But a natural query that springs up to the mind, is that why Ghosh prefers to remain silent about that night of terror. I suppose, it was not Ghosh's intention to pile up facts and figures, as facts like rumours are often unfounded. I hope, Ghosh only intended to bring the lost history of Marichjhapi into light; he was more interested in singing the song of celebration, the creative spirit, the perseverance, the will-spirit of these refugees who adorned the island as one adorns one's home. The point is quite explicit, when Mashima queries about that notebook at the end of the novel that if the night of the massacre figures in Nirmal's notebook, Kanai explains that how the notebook was handed over to Horen before the assault begun on that fateful night. For Nirmal, the struggle of the refugees against the government repression, their whole hearted effort to build a colony in the tide country seemed more like poetry; he tried to register it in his own way. As Nirmal mentions at the end of his notebook:

. . . I feel certain you (Kanai) you will have a greater claim to the world's ears than I ever had. (Ghosh 278)

At end of the novel when the notebook gets lost in the storm, Kanai assures his Mashima that all is not lost as most of it is there in his memory, he takes the pledge that he would publish them, thereby affirming Nirmal's faith in him. Ghosh, like Nirmal narrates this tale of woe through his novel, a rare tale of suffering where myth and reality enter into a perfect symbiosis. But the question remains. Why the plight of the dalit refugees didn't stir the imagination of the gifted band of Bengali writers. Why still to this day they remain unsung and uncelebrated?

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[i] **Saat Bhai Champa** or **Sat Bhai Chompa** is a popular folk tale in the Bengal . The story was first officially published by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumder in the book Thakurmar Jhuli in 1907.

[ii] According to the Hindu scriptures Dharmaraj is the Lord of Justice, he is also the god of death.

[iii] Thakumar Jhuli (Grandmother's Tale) is a collection of Bengali folk and fairy tales complied by Dhakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar in 1907. Rabindranath Tagore wrote its introduction. Since then it is more a part of Children's literature.

[iv] Purba Paschim or East West (trans. by Enakshi Chatterjee, Sahitya Akademi, 2004)

[v] Amiya Kumar Samanta in his article 'Marichjhapi' also denied of any kind of blockade, specifically 'economic blockade'. According to him the police only interrupted the illegal means of living of the refugees. (*Marichjhapi- Chinna Desh, Chinna Itihaas* Ed. Madhumoy Pal, 259-260)

[vi] Whereas Amiya Kumar Samanta in his article painted a picture of the final day, which reflects, as if the residents of the island were more than happy to accompany the police to their boats. There was no firing, no killing, no protest; all the other reports about the final night of 14 May are baseless, false, and are a part of a larger political conspiracy. A common allegation against all the people who have penned their thoughts and findings on Marichjhapi is, they lacked proper knowledge about the geographical location of the island.

[vii] Pal, Madhumoy(ed.). *Marichjhapi: Chinna Desh, Chinna* Itihash. 2009, 77-90