

'When the house of history is on fire, journalists are often the first responders, pulling victims away from the flames.

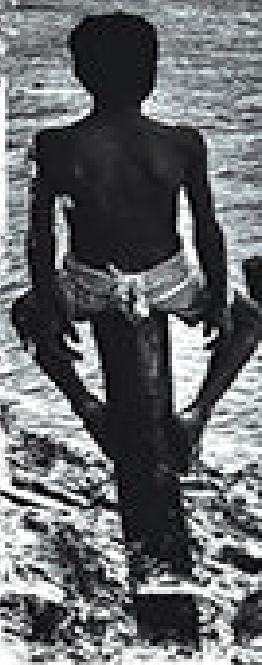
Deep Halder is one of them.'

— Amitava Kumar, author of *Lunch with a Bigot: The Writer in the World*

BLOOD ISLAND

AN ORAL HISTORY OF
THE MARICHJHAPI MASSACRE

DEEP HALDER



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Marichjhapi Massacre

Deep Halder



HarperCollins *Publishers* India

Baba,
without you this book would not have been written.

Rebellions were begun by people who had not read Das Capital or the Red Book. It was their reality that had urged them into rebellion.

–Manoranjan Byapari

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Preface

HOW THEY KILLED THE DREAMERS IN THE SUNDARBANS

This book is about an island time forgot. It is also about my oldest memory; a memory that is both a fairytale and a bad dream. This book is about Marichjhapi.

Marichjhapi, as cold fact and sweet lullaby, comes to me at unexpected hours – when the TV ticker screams that India will deport Rohingyas or a new story on Syria brings out that old photograph of Alan Kurdi yet again to tug at heartstrings. Even almost forty years after I first heard the story of Marichjhapi, such references take me back to an unending farm with coconut and palm trees, ponds and paddy fields, and an abiding memory of a dark secret shared in whispers as a bedtime story. It's amazing how the most horrific sits pretty with what is serene.

I become my child self again at times like this, playing inside a two-storeyed house sitting in the middle of the seven bighas of land that used to be my weekend getaway. My grandfather, a deputy magistrate in the British-ruled undivided India, had settled in the western half of Bengal after Partition, the part that had remained with India. In his travels across the newly formed state of West Bengal, he saw in the South 24 Parganas the charms of the land he'd left behind. That land is now Bangladesh.

Taldi is one hour away by local train from the southern tip of Kolkata. It is a place so postcard perfect that my parents would not feel like forcing me

back to the city when school reopened after weekends. Our Taldi house became the way it did through months of hard work. The salty soil was made cultivable by manuring it with wagons full of new earth. Fish breeding was my grandmother's department and the three ponds on the property offered almost every variety a Bengali palate could pine for.

Twenty-five miles from Taldi – around the time my favourite weekend sport was chasing a spotless white calf into the paddy fields with my grandfather's walking stick – thousands of men, women and children were trying to set up their own Neverland and being chased around by officials of the new Left Front government, who were saying the ecology would be destroyed if these refugees succeeded in their endeavour. That place was Marichjhapi; and it came to me as a story through Mana.

Mana herself came unannounced as a distant cousin to look after me and tell me stories. She had a strange tongue and stranger manners. It took me some time to warm up to her, but Mana Goldar had stories for me. Stories from Marichjhapi.

I was too young to know what rape was or fathom the full import of the word 'refugee'. Though it was spoken many times in the house with reference to Mana in the adult conversations held around me, no one explained to me who or what a refugee is. Looking at Mana, I thought a refugee was one who had no place to go. Mana said her first home had many refugees.

She was born into, and named after, Mana Camp in faraway Dandakaranya, where her parents had been sent after East Bengal became a country for Muslims. They travelled miles to cross the border, hoping that people who looked similar and spoke the same tongue would open their homes and hearts to them, only to be pushed into the hot, humid north. It was in this squatters' colony that Mana was born, where refugees toiled day and night for meagre wages from sarkari babus. When they protested, their mothers, daughters, sisters and aunts were taken away by sinister men. That was rape, Mana said.

Mana was in her teens when she came to stay with us. She had spent her first twelve years in Dandakaranya and one in Marichjhapi. It was a hard

word for me to say, so Marichjhapi became ‘mud island’ in her stories, an island of wet soil. Her last home, she said, was always covered in mud and they wore no slippers.

There were no sarkari babus in Marichjhapi. Men sang and women danced as the sun sank into the sea. Hope was enough to hold on to during those difficult days they spent turning a barren island into a home.

‘But it all had to end. The resident deity, Bonbibi, didn’t hear our cries,’ Mana had said as she wiped her tears.

The darkness in her eyes as she told me her tale cemented a bond that stayed. Mana left us in eight months, but Marichjhapi kept coming back to me; in stray conversations and chance meetings, the gravity of the horror gradually unfolding.

As recently as 2017, Marichjhapi slithered into my consciousness in a Bhopal newsroom, of all places during a conversation with my colleague Mokapati Poornima. She is a deep diver into lost causes; a star reporter in the newspaper I edited at the time, she travelled the length and breadth of Madhya Pradesh to scoop out stories of despair and distress.

I asked her once why she risks life and limb for her job and she said her ever curious gene must have come from her mother, who travelled from Bangladesh to Calcutta, Calcutta to Dandakaranya, Dandakaranya to the Sundarbans and back to Dandakaranya again in search of hearth and home.

‘Sundarbans? Where in the Sundarbans?’ I enquired.

‘There is a place called Marichjhapi, sir. Bengali refugees had settled there once.’

‘Your mother is Bengali?’ was all I could ask. Poornima nodded.

I then dialled Jyotirmoy Mondal, a rights activist, an old source for stories and a family friend. Mondal knows of the horrors of Marichjhapi firsthand, having witnessed the growth of the cottage industry around the tragedy and the poverty many of its survivors still lived in, even as governments bluffed and fell.

‘Tell me again what happened,’ I said. There was an urgent need in me to hear it all again, revisit stories I’d half grasped as a boy and kept putting together piece by broken piece in later years.

Mondal never tires of retelling Marichjhapi. ‘Refugee settlement was never meant to be easy. How do you handle swarms crossing over from Bangladesh to West Bengal? The problem was, when they were in Opposition, Left leaders told the Bangladeshi Hindu refugees, who were being packed in hordes to squatter camps in Dandakaranya, that if they came to power they would bring them back to West Bengal. But once in power, they backtracked.

‘Feeling betrayed by bad politics and fed up with the miserable living conditions in the camps in Dandakaranya, some refugees came and settled in the tiny island of Marichjhapi in the Sundarbans. For eighteen months they toiled to turn “mud island” into a habitat. For eighteen months, the government tried many times to evict them.

‘When your father and a few other scholars, intellectuals and journalists went there, they found Marichjhapi to be one of the best developed islands in the Sundarbans. The refugees did not ask the government for money, nor did they squat on others’ property. They only wanted a marshy wasteland.

‘But between 14 and 16 May 1979, in one of the worst human rights violations in post-independent India, the West Bengal government forcibly evicted around 10,000 or more from the island. There was rape, murder and poisoning. Bodies were buried in sea. Countless were killed even as some escaped, too afraid to tell the tale. At least 7,000 men, women and children were killed.’

‘But what about those who escaped the carnage?’ I asked him.

‘You know some of them, don’t you?’ he replied.

‘Mana,’ I whispered, to which he said, ‘Not just her.’

And no, it isn’t just Mana Goldar. I have, over the years, collected Marichjhapi’s broken fragments and tried to make it whole again. Researchers have taken Marichjhapi to Oxbridge lecture circuits. Sociologists, historians and Dalit activists have put out theories on what happened and why. Amitav Ghosh has fictionalized Marichjhapi in his book, *The Hungry Tide*.

In one of the most definitive papers on the massacre, ‘Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and the

Marichjhapi Massacre’, Ross Mallick attempts to answer why the Left Front government did what it did in 1979. ‘The Marichjhapi massacre was not that different from the Bosnian massacres, but at least in Europe the politicians responsible got indicted and had to go into hiding ... However, no criminal charges were laid against any of those involved [in the Marichjhapi massacre] nor was any investigation undertaken,’ Mallick writes.

In ‘Dwelling on Morichjhanpi: When Tigers Became “Citizens”, Refugees “Tiger-Food”’, published in the Economic and Political Weekly on 23 April 2005, Annu Jalais observes the incident from a Dalit perspective. ‘The government’s primacy on ecology and its use of force in Marichjhapi was seen by the islanders as a betrayal not only of refugees and of the poor and the marginalized in general, but also of Bengali backward caste identity,’ she writes.

Most of the Marichjhapi islanders belonged to lower castes and were given the short shrift by the Left Front government, which was predominantly upper caste even though it espoused a classless, casteless society, Jalais argues.

Unlike Mallick and Jalais, I have never put pen to paper to bring Marichjhapi back for newspaper readers. I have never sat down for a drink with my academic or media friends to deconstruct the events of 1978-79.

What I have set out to do, instead, is document its oral history, the tales of a few of those who lived through those dark days. Here, I have recorded Mana Goldar’s story, journalist Sukhoranjan Sengupta’s reports, refugee mother Phonibala’s nightmare, the memory of the man who swam a river to save fellow journeymen and several others who have not been able to bury their past in the bloodied ‘mud island’.

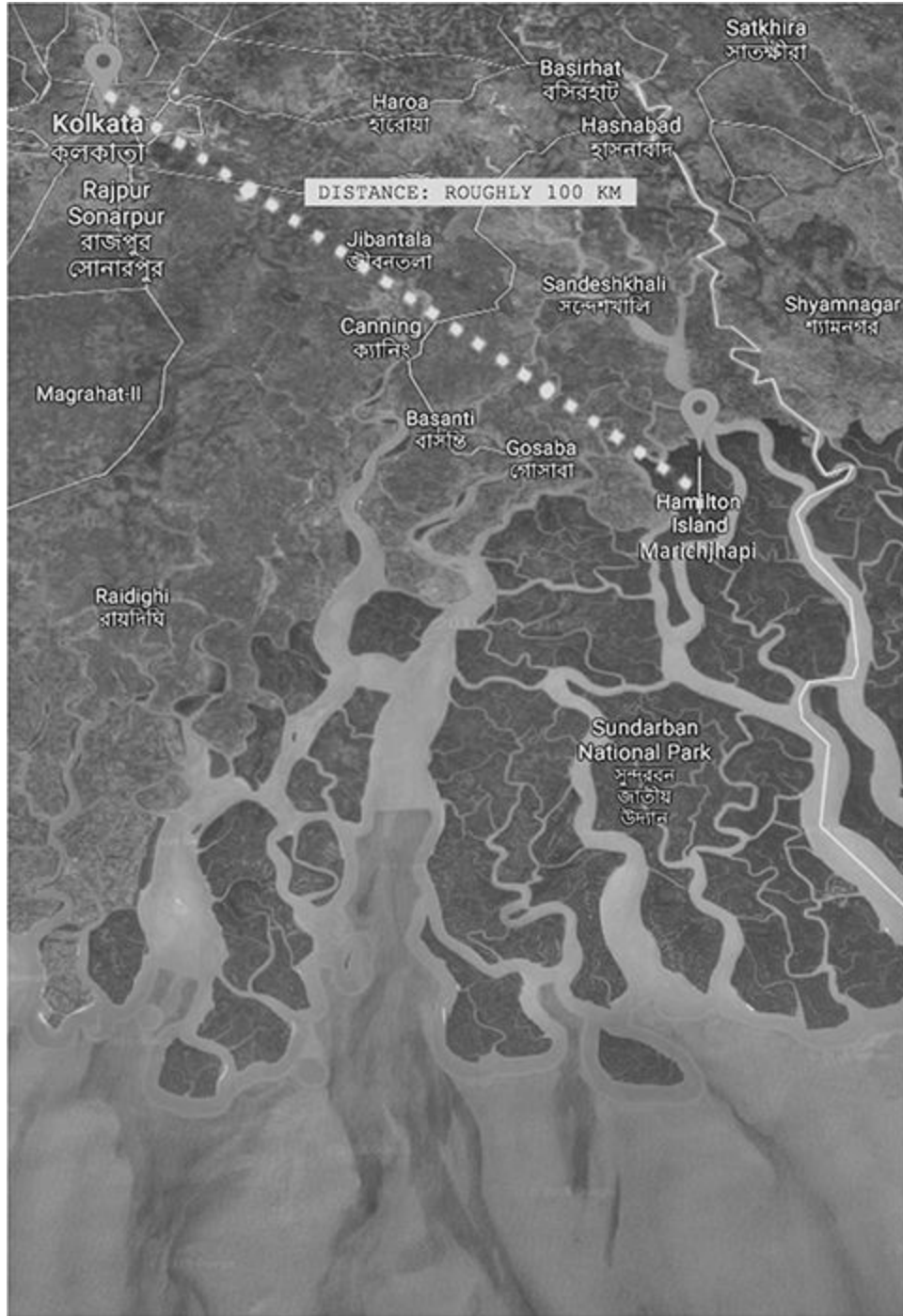
Their nightmare is mine too. This is how it all began. And ended.

Introduction

*Nobody knows, nobody can ever know, not even in memory,
because there are moments in time that are not knowable.*

– Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*

Marichjhapi is an island in the Sundarbans, located about seventy-five kilometres east of Kolkata. In mid-1978, around 1.5 lakh Hindu refugees, mostly belonging to the lower castes, came to settle here from refugee camps in central India. Some were driven back to the camps they came from, while the remaining managed to slip through police cordons and reach Marichjhapi.



Source: Google Maps

In less than a year, they transformed this no man's land into a bustling village. There were rows of huts, a fishing co-operative, a school, salt pans, a health centre, a boat manufacturing unit, a beedi-making factory and a bakery, with money pooled from their individual savings and some help

from writers, activists and public intellectuals sympathetic to their story. The West Bengal government extended no help.

By May 1979, the island had been cleared of all refugees by the Left Front government. Most of them were sent back to the camps they came from. There were many deaths during that period as a result of diseases, malnutrition as well as violence unleashed by the police on the orders of the government. Some of the refugees who survived Marichjhapi say the number went as high as 10,000. Marichjhapi could have been a shining example of the entrepreneurial spirit of a band of Bengali Dalits. Instead, it has become a forgotten story of one of the worst pogroms of post-Independent India, bigger than the 1984 anti-Sikh riots in Delhi or the 2002 anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat for the sheer scale of the violence and the number of deaths and rapes.

Why such violence took place is what this book tries to find out through the voices of those who were part of the Marichjhapi tragedy. But before we come to Marichjhapi, let us go back to the beginning – the Partition of Bengal that caused Bengalis to move from various districts of East Pakistan to Calcutta, from where they were packed off to refugee camps in central India.

Bengal, Interrupted

Bengal was divided twice. On 16 October 1905, the eastern, predominantly Muslim areas were separated from the western, largely Hindu areas. Though the then-Viceroy of colonial India, Lord Curzon, stressed that Bengal was being divided in order to secure administrative efficiency, it was inherently the colonizers' divide-and-rule policy aimed at separating the people of Bengal on communal lines.

While the Hindus (who belonged mostly to business and landowning classes) complained that the partition would make them 'minorities' in a province that also comprised Bihar and Orissa, the Muslims generally supported the division as they felt used by and inferior to the Hindu businessmen and landlords in west Bengal. Moreover, most of the mills and

factories were established in and around Calcutta, though raw materials were sourced from east Bengal from lands mostly worked upon by Muslim labourers.

In 1906, the Muslim League was formed in Dhaka to give Indian Muslims a political voice. The Partition sparked a severe political crisis with the Indian National Congress beginning the Swadeshi movement, which saw the large-scale boycott of British products and institutions. Due to such political protests, the two parts of Bengal were reunited on 12 December 1911.

Then came another partition, not on religious but on linguistic lines. Hindi, Odia and Assamese areas were separated to form different provinces, with Bihar and Orissa in the west, and Assam in the east. The administrative capital of British India was also shifted from Calcutta to New Delhi.

The scars from the first partition never quite healed and they were violently raked up during this second partition of 1947, creating wounds that festered.

In August 1947, when the British finally left India after nearly 300 years, the subcontinent was divided into two independent nations, again on the basis of religion: Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan. Thus began one of the greatest migrations in human history as millions of Muslims moved (or were forcibly moved) to West and East Pakistan (now known as Bangladesh), while millions of Hindus and Sikhs headed in the opposite direction.

The first wave that arrived in West Bengal were the upper caste Hindus and not the Dalits; the latter, firmly attached to the soil of their homeland for livelihood, did not leave their homes as swiftly as the upper caste Hindus.

Another important premise is that Muslims and low caste Hindus had little animosity. This was primarily due to the fact that they faced the same economic exploitation under the ruling upper class Hindus. They not only shared the same occupation, but also had the same lifestyle, language and

cultural fabric. To upper caste Hindus, both Muslims and lower caste Hindus were equally untouchable.



The academic paper 'On the Margins of Citizenship: Cooper's Camp in Nadia' by Ishita Dey says that the significant years of refugee influx in the east (from East Pakistan to West Bengal) were 1947, 1948, 1950, 1960, 1962, 1964, 1970, whereas in the western region (from West Pakistan to North India), it was over by 1949. She writes:

According to official estimates of the Government of West Bengal, in 1953, 25 lakhs have been forcibly displaced. In 1953-61 there was no major influx but the figure swelled to 31-32 lakhs up to April 1958 and later in 1962 around 55,000 persons migrated after killing of minorities in Pabna and Rajshahi. Approximately 6 lakh people crossed border between 1964 and 1971 and following the disturbances after creation of Bangladesh there was a massive exodus of about 75 lakhs. It was reported by the Minister of Supply and Rehabilitation, Shri Ramniwas Mirdha in a Lok Sabha debate in 1976 that 52.31 lakh persons migrated from East Bengal to India from 1948-1971.

This massive influx virtually broke down the administrative machinery of the West Bengal government. Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy, the then-chief minister of West Bengal, in a statement in the Assembly on 28 September 1950, said that mere provision of shelter for refugees was not enough. What his government repeatedly emphasized was lack of space, lack of resources and lack of aptitude on part of the refugees to adapt themselves to new conditions.

On 14 October 1952, the passport system was introduced and its announcement sparked another flood of refugees.

According to official records, the number was 3,16,000 in West Bengal and, including Assam and Tripura, went up to 5,87,000 within three years.

This group of refugees was also ninety-nine per cent Namasudras and low caste Hindus.

The refugees who came to India between 31 March 1958 and December 1963 had to give an undertaking that they would not seek any help from the government and, in addition, a citizen of India had to give an undertaking of their maintenance before a migration certificate could be issued. However, these restrictions could not check the inflow completely.

As for illegal entries into Indian territory, the total number of infiltrators came up to about 3 lakhs, according to a conservative estimate from unofficial sources.

Another heavy influx was witnessed between December 1963 and February 1964, following the disturbance sparked by the loss of Hazrat Bal from the mosque of Srinagar in Kashmir. The indiscriminate killings, rapes and looting at Khulna, Dhaka, Jessore, Faridpur, Mymensingh, Noakhali and Chattogram drove out more than 2 lakh refugees from East Pakistan. Out of these, 1 lakh came to West Bengal, 75 thousand to Assam and 25 thousand to Tripura (*Jugantar* newspaper, 7 April 1964).

How painful this journey was, emotionally and otherwise, is documented in [Chapter 1](#) of this book through a nostalgic retelling of the migration to India from East Pakistan by rights activist Jyotirmoy Mondal.

Destination Dandakaranya

The new contingent of refugees, mostly Namasudras, were sent from temporary camps in West Bengal to camps in Dandakaranya, comprising parts of what are today independent states of Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. The Dandakaranya Development Authority (DDA) was set up by the central government to develop this mostly arid region by gainfully employing refugees in road construction work and for developing farmlands.

The region has been referenced in the Hindu epic Ramayana, when Rama, Lakshmana and Sita were exiled for fourteen long years. It was somewhere here, the ancient text tells us, that King Ravana's sister

Surpanakha met Rama's brother Lakshmana and fell in love. When he snubbed her and cut off her nose, a long battle followed that ended with Rama killing Ravana.

The lakhs of Bengali refugees who were sent here fought their own battles with sweltering summers and freezing winters, uncultivable land and natives who spoke a different language.

Some adapted to the conditions over time and made this region home; like sixty-four year old Kalachand Das who was sent to Mana Camp in Raipur and never left. Marichjhapi was a misadventure, he maintains ([Chapter 6](#)).

Others pined to return to West Bengal where there were fellow Bengalis who shared the same language and culture. Some recount the hostility of camp officers and natives, as well as the unfavourable living condition in the camps ([Chapter 6](#)).

The Left Betrayal

When the refugees were being packed off to various camps in Dandakaranya, the Left parties who were in opposition in West Bengal demanded that they be absorbed within Bengal itself. In the course of my interviews with the survivors of Marichjhapi, many have told me that Jyoti Basu – who went on to become chief minister for twenty-three uninterrupted years (1977-2000) – himself had given speeches advocating the West Bengal government to do the same. Many Left leaders, most notably Ram Chatterjee, went to visit the refugees in Dandakaranya and assured them that they would be back in Bengal when the Left comes to power ([Chapter 8](#)). The refugees, naturally, thought the Left was their ally.

In June 1977, the Left Front came to power but, surprisingly, no one from the government seemed interested in following up on the promises made earlier to rehabilitate the refugees in West Bengal. Many desperate refugees, after waiting for some time, sent a memorandum to Radhika Banerjee, who was the relief and rehabilitation minister of the Left Front government at that time, on 12 July 1977. They said if the government

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