

Uncovering the Past: East Bengali Namasudras and Their Experiences on Marichjhapi Island, Sundarban

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Abstract:*The present study explores the struggle of Dalit Namasudra settlers on Marichjhapi Island in the Sundarban region in West Bengal, an under-researched area in partition history. Through a critical analysis of historical accounts, books, articles, autobiographies, and oral testimonies, this research sheds light on the brutal eviction of Namasudra's resettlement by State force, including their struggles for survival and rehabilitation. The study highlights the complexities of caste dynamics in the context of displacement, dispersal, rehabilitation, and eviction of lower caste Namasudra community on Marichjhapi Island in West Bengal.*

Keywords: Bhadrak, Dalits, East Bengal, Marichjhapi, Namasudra, Rehabilitation etc.

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Introduction

Independence of India came with the Partition of India. Simultaneously, the division of Bengal in 1947 led to one of the largest mass migrations in South Asian history; millions of people forced to leave their ancestral homes sought shelter in West Bengal as well. The Namasudras, a Dalit community, were among the many groups that migrated to West Bengal during and after Partition. While the displacement and their experiences of refugees in various camps and settlements have been documented, the story of lower caste refugees' resettlement on Marichjhapi Island in the Sundarban area remains a lesser-known chapter in the partition history.

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This study seeks to uncover the past experiences of Namasudra refugees on the Marichjhapi Island, exploring the challenges they faced, the ways in which they were marginalized, and their struggles for survival and rehabilitation.

In the case of Bengal freedom came with partition. It is a given fact that in the partition historiography offers a little space to those who belong to the lower strata of the society as constructed by the nationalist-bourgeois class. Hence, The Marichjhapi Massacre is one of the tragic events in the history of most influential Dalit groups in Bengal. In this episode, Namasudras community of Bengal, who had first suffered as victims of communalism, later become a victim's of brutal eviction from Marichjhapi under the pretext of environmental preservation. Their experiences on Marichjhapi Island were shaped by the complexities of caste dynamics, environmental challenges, and government policies. Where Bhadrals, as the dominant caste group, have historically wielded significant social, economic, and political power, while the Namasudra community, an untouchable Dalit group, came from eastern and central Bengal in the post-1950s period, has a history marked by social and economic marginalization and forced migration. By analyzing the discourse surrounding the Marichjhapi massacre, this study seeks to understand how dominant narratives silence marginalized Dalits' voices, justify violence, and perpetuate social inequalities. By examining this lesser-known chapter in the history of India's Partition, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex caste dynamics in post-independence India.

Backdrop

In 1979, several East Bengali Dalit Namasudras migrants were strenuously evacuation from their self-made resettlement on Marichjhapi islands in the Sundarban region by West Bengal state police forces, where it is claimed that thousands of East Bengali Namasudras were killed, while the majority of homogenous caste Hindus of Calcutta, the intellectually acclaimed Bengali Bhadrals chose to kept silence, ironically during the time when the state had just elected a Communist government to power, where thousands of Namasudra migrants were brutally killed, this incident, remains a less known chapter in the history of West Bengal,¹ However, the history of the Marichjhapi Massacre must be understood within the broader context of the pre-

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Independence Dalit politics in colonial Bengal, taking into account various significant factors. Ross Mallick, Sekhar Bandhyopadhyay noted that Marichjhapi massacre must be understood in the context of the long historical Dalit movement in colonial Bengal that contributed to the division of Bengal, as well as the class, caste, and communal splits in Bengal. In colonial Bengal, the Dalit movement emerged as the most powerful and socially as well as politically organized Dalit movements, fueled by socio-economic oppression in the hands of caste Hindu Zamindars.² The socio-political movement of the lower caste gradually evolved into a strong political entities which enough to keep the caste Hindu dominated Congress party of Bengal in opposition seat. The exclusion of the upper Caste Hindus from political power led to the Bhadraklok dominating the Congress party, pressing for the division of Bengal in 1947, which weakened the Dalit political movement so much so that. Subsequently, the community got divided as they became politically marginalized and scattered in different parts of India as well as in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). As a result, the caste Hindu dominant Congress had established itself in to power within Indian dominion west Bengal.

Immediate after partition of Bengal, migration group mainly constitute of upper-caste, urban middle class, landed elite fleeing to west Bengal due to communal threat in East Bengal (now Bangladesh). They resettled and integrated themselves in mainstream Bengal society easily by virtue of their profession, assets, and relatives in West Bengal. Furthermore, the congress government established colonies in and around Calcutta.³ In East Bengal, the almost total goodbye of the landed elite and middle classes, those who had the resources to migrate, soon after the Partition. This exodus left behind mostly Dalit peasants, such as the Namasudras, who remained there due to their ancestral home and limited assets for migration; now they prerequisite the means to survive on their own and became dependent on government assistance. After 1950, following communal violence, huge number of lower caste community migrated to West Bengal and were initially placed by the government in crowded refugee camps, where they had little choice but to accept government policy regarding their settlement and rehabilitation. Moreover, the government claimed that there was not enough available land in West Bengal, and it was dispersing them to other states, hilly or uninhabitable areas of central Indian. In doing so, the upper-caste dominated Congress government effectively dismantled the Scheduled Caste

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movement. It pushed its members into refugee colonies outside Bengal. This action reinforced the supremacy of the traditional Bengali tri-caste elite.⁴

Meanwhile, while the government dispersed the Dalits to outside states, the left coalition party opposed and claimed that the government relocate them inside Bengal rather than distribute across India on the lands of other people. Left coalition leaders demand government settle them either in the Sundarban region or vacant land in various places of state.⁵ While the caste Hindu squatter's colonies were gradually recognized, the lower caste Namasudras peasants were exiled to outside states, where they often clashed with the tribal populations, as their castes were not native to those states. Hence, the Dalits, Namasudras, would have been eligible to settle down in Bengal, where the caste Hindu elite were settled, but Dandakaranyanya is a completely unknown world for Namasudras refugees. After 1975, the refugees became a possibility for the left front's electoral base. Hence, the Left Front leaders could play on the resettlement & rehabilitation issues to obtain an electoral base among both the evacuated refugees and caste Hindu refugees of colonies in West Bengal.⁶ The leftist leaders opposed the Congress government's efforts to throw out the Dalit Namasudras from Bengal and further gave assurance that after they came to rule, the Left government would resettle the Dalit refugees in native Bengal.⁷

While the opposition advocating for the refugees resettlement, CPM leader Jyoti Basu declared that if the left party came to power, the Dalit refugees of Dandakaranya would be rehabilitated within Bengal. When the refugees of Dandakaranya started to move into West Bengal, and time, again, they were forced to send them back to Dandakaranya or arrested.⁸ It is pertinent to mention that the rehabilitation policy of Government changed completely after the Congress was ousted from power, and now the popular the Left Front coalition came into power. The refugees had to be resettled in the Sundarbans region, particularly those originated nearest Khulna,⁹ During the early years of the century, they clear the jungles in the Indian part of the Sundarbans forest instead of traveling to Dandakaranya, which is a dry or mountainous forest. But despite their repeated attempts to relocate to West Bengal, they were forcibly removed from the rail platforms where they had gathered.¹⁰ The majority of lower castes, peasants, and rural residents were impacted by the on-going polarization of India and Pakistan as distinct nations for Muslims and Hindus. This was particularly true for lower caste Namasudra Bengalis, who coexisted with the Muslim community and were not as religiously alienated.¹¹

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Marichjhapi Massacre

When the Left Front took power in 1977, they discovered that their followers who were refugees had taken their statement and had sold their property and assets to return to West Bengal. Throughout these time, 1,50,000 Dandakaranya migrants arrived when the government started to return them by force. Nonetheless, many migrants managed to escape to other parts of West Bengal. Beginning of that year, over 30,000 Dalit refugees sailed to Morichjhapi and settled there under the leadership of Satish Mandal, head of the Udbastu Unnayansil Samity and a former close associate of the Communist Party-backed refugee program.¹² The Left Front minister at the time, Ram Chatterjee, made many trips to the Dandakaranya camps and urged the refugees to relocate to West Bengal's Sunderbans. However, as part of its rehabilitation plan and as part of a shift in governance, the Left Front Government also declared Marichjhapi a reserved forest area and resettled refugees, in violation of the Forest Acts, disrupting the potential forest wealth and causing ecological imbalance in the area. Therefore, the government prioritizes the environment over human habitation. *As Ross Mallick contends*, Dalit Namasudra migrants had been forcibly expelled from the state, and those who would have made Marichjhapi their home would not have constituted a financial burden on the state government.¹³ It was mentioned that Udvastu Unnyanshil Samiti, a refugee organization, had a significant influence among the Dandakaranya refugees. They denied being a part of the United Central Refugee Council (UCRC), a leftist-backed refugee organization, because they believed that refugee issues were a national issue and that they had no right to belong to any political party. The CPI (M), on the other hand, was unhappy with the idea that their aim of gaining electoral advantages in states with large refugee populations, like as Madhya Pradesh and Orissa, may be dashed. After winning the refugee vote, the Left Front demanded that Dalit refugees return to Dandakaranya, rejecting their proposal for a settlement in Bengal.¹⁴ On January 26, 1979, chief minister Jyoti Basu proclaimed an economic cordon surround the Marichjhapi Island. The settlers of the Island were tear-gassed and inhumanely tortured. Their home, factory, huts, and fisheries in Marichjhapi were demolished, and tube wells were poisoned. The myth that the Tigers of

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Sundarbans forests turn into man-eaters after they eaten on the bodies of the refugees killed at Marichjhapi.¹⁵

The people of Marichjhapi settlers built houses, roads, a dispensary, and a factory without government help. Despite their mutual support and supportive life-force, the government keep on in its effort to evacuate the survivors from Marichjhapi. The settlers were killed when the police opened fire on January 31, 1979. In their upbeat reporting about the resettlement challenges, the journalists on the go highlighted the complaints of the Dalits refugees on Marichjhapi. The opposition members of the state assembly started a protest on the government's treatment of them after the photographs were published in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (February 8, 1979). Fearing further condemnation and growing public's kindness for the Dalit refugees, the chief minister expelled journalists from Marichjhapi and accused their media coverage, claiming it also fuelled the refugees' militancy and conceit. Instead, he claimed that the media support their expulsion on the grounds of national importance.

In May 1979, the failure of the economic barricade, the administration started violent evacuation. The settlers were denied water, food supply, cut off the island from connectivity and thirty police launches surrounded the Marichjhapi; they were also tear-gassed, had their houses, fisheries, and tube-wells demolished, and had their boats destroyed. Additionally, anyone attempting to get past the barricades was shot at. In order to get water, the locals were now forced to walk far into the forest area after dark and eat wild grass. It was claimed that hundreds of men, women, and children perished at that time, and their bodies were dumped into the sea. The essential products were not effectively implemented notwithstanding the Calcutta High Court's ruling to allow their entry into the island.¹⁶ When the police failed to drive out the settlers from the island, on 14th and 16th May, 1979, the survivors were attacked by police forces and hired gangsters. Young men were detained, and women were cruelly raped. The bodies of several hundred men, women, and kids were dumped into the river after they were slaughtered. The Left Front government was able to drive the Dalit Namasudra refugees from their self-made house in just over eighty hours.¹⁷

It should be mentioned, though, that no one implicated in the Marichjhapi massacre, either politicians or officials, has been charged with criminal charge. Even Prime Minister

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Morarji Desai decided not to pursue the issue because he wanted to maintain the Communists' support for his government. Due to the ruling left coalition's promise to relocate the Dalits in Bengal, many exiled refugees and settled refugees in the colony had voted for them.¹⁸ The refugees believed that the government's severe eviction was made possible by the support of the Bhadrak, who viewed the refugees and the islanders of the Sundarbans as inferior creatures who trailed tigers in their hierarchy of importance. The islanders expressed their belief that the division between the metropolis as dominant and the rural as marginal was strengthened by the treachery of Marichjhapi massacre.¹⁹

Conclusion

To sum up, it is pertinent to mention that partition led to a huge mass migration across international borders. Dalit Namasudras' arrival in post-1950 due to extreme communal violence triggered against Namashudra peasants who remained in East Bengal. Dalits did not receive the same treatment as the earlier upper caste migrants who migrated immediately after partition. First, they were put up in crowded refugee camps and later forcefully dispersed to central India, next brutally evicted from native Bengal, by doing so, firstly disintegrate the erstwhile Namashudra socio-political movement and next, to create in Bengal a hegemonic upper caste homogenous leadership. It has been a matter of great amusement that West Bengal, being a state home to around 80% of the Scheduled Castes, has never witnessed a single Dalit uprising post partition. It is here that the Left Front has deviously changed the political discourse around the caste question. The Bhadrak Communist leaders of the Left Front, caste struggle was irrelevant in the face of class disparity. In fact, Jyoti Basu, in his response to the Mandal Commission, mentioned that in West Bengal, there were only two castes, the rich and the poor.²⁰

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