



The Unquiet Sundarbans: The Making of an Ecological History

Dr. Samar Kanti Chakrabartty

Head Department of History

Achhruram Memorial College,

Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University

Purulia, Pin-723202, W.B., India.

Email id: samarkantichakrabartty@gmail.com

Bio-note: Dr. Samar Kanti Chakrabartty is currently working as an Assistant Professor at Achhruram Memorial College, Jhalda, affiliated to Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University, Purulia, West Bengal. He has obtained his M.Phil. from Jadavpur University and awarded Ph.D degree from the University of Burdwan. He has published many textbooks for students at the UG and PG levels and also some research-oriented books in the field of environmental history.

Abstract

An environmental movement took place in the Sundarbans due to the effect of partition, where uprooted people from Bangladesh sought to live and coexist with its ecological setup. After the liberation movement of Bangladesh in 1971, innumerable refugees migrated forcefully from Bangladesh to Calcutta and from Calcutta to Dandakaranya. But they didn't adjust to the unfavorable environment and different cultures. This paper explains that during this turmoil, the state's government emphasized the preservation policy of the Sundarbans mangroves as well as the 'land' and 'water' of the state. On the contrary, vulnerable people of the Dandakaranya belt were required to settle down passionately in the same landscape to survive, which further added to the conflict between "government" and 'people.' Thus, the refugee problem has turned into an environmental issue that has drawn country-wide attention. This article presents an original structure for the potential benefits of bringing environmental conflicts and ecological history into a single cross-disciplinary narrative.

Keywords: Partition, Environmental-crisis, Refugees, Sundarbans, Marichjhanphi



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Introduction

The Sundarbans, literally, 'beautiful forest' in Bengal, is a large archipelago situated between the vast Indian Ocean to the south and the fertile plains of Bengal to the north. Created by confluence of the Ganges, Meghna, and Brahmaputra rivers and their innumerable distributaries, the Sundarbans constitute the southern end of Bangladesh and West Bengal. The Ganga-Brahmaputra delta stretches several hundred miles, from the shorelines of Orissa in west to those of Chittagong and Burma in the east; it is the largest delta in the world. It is animated by two opposing flows of water: fresh water coursing all the way down from the Himalayas towards the Bay of Bengal and salt water streaming up the tide from the Indian Ocean into the Bengali hinterland.

The roots of environmental disputes are continuing in post-colonial India, not only between eco-system and non-ecosystem people but also, perhaps more importantly, between different perceptions among social classes. The fight is being politicized between "we, the state," and "they, the citizens" (see Ghosh, Avijit 57-75). It is, in fact, a struggle between the powerful government and powerless refugees. During the colonial period (in 1872), the Lieutenant Governor of the North Western Province, on a tour of Dehra Dun District, received repeated complaints from the natives about the "severity of the forest rules' dwelling on the fact that no forest or wasteland was made over to them in absolute proprietary rights, and so they were afraid that in some future period the government might resume the whole of it and leave them destitute (Rawat 313) As one Hillman succinctly put it, "the forest has belonged to us from time immemorial. Our ancestors



planted and protected them; now that they have become valuable, governments step in and rob us of them. The Marichjhanpi massacre is a subtle political game and was a completely different environmental issue in post-colonial West Bengal.

Despite the land crisis, West Bengal faced intense pressure from 9.5 million landless refugees from eastern Pakistan. Therefore, the land crisis further increased extremely in the newly formed state of West Bengal after the end of colonization. In spite of the lack of proper rehabilitation for refugees, the government placed a high priority on the preservation of wetlands in Calcutta and its suburbs, and the Sundarbans received special consideration, which exacerbated the conflict (Chatterjee 73-75) Thus, the partition planted a seed of environmental crisis unknowingly, which turned into an environmental issue for the Sundarbans.

Late-colonial West Bengal's eco-political history can be divided into two overlapping but distinct clusters of concerns. Firstly, the partition of India in 1947 brought massive tension over the environment and degraded the ecological setup of the study area extensively. Partition has struck at the heart of the socio-ecological network and has accelerated the fast-changing relationship between "men and the environment"—all significant issues have been overlapping in modern studies. Secondly, previous studies emphasized the "land," "water," and "forest," but they did not separate out how the eco-political troubles have emerged as a result of partition. In brief, the goals are to understand how partition impacted the river and coastal regimes by describing how people ranging from Bangladeshi refugees to local settlers, driven by diverse cultural, economic, and political factors, have transformed the fluvial landscape of the Sundarbans and are living with natural calamities with no voice and no choice. Empty-handed refugees were forced to take over the Sundarbans' water-saturated land after two steps of partition, where they played an important role in transforming the isolated delta (partly land and partly water covered) into productive and livable landscapes for their immediate survival. ⁷ Apart from the fast-changing relationship between "men and the environment, they faced hard socio-economic problems in the unstable landscapes of the Sundarbans.⁸ This article explains the environmental conflict that started in this peaceful area while the government thought the legacy of colonial forest laws would collapse if Bangladeshi people acquired land in the Sundarbans. Still, now, many Bangladeshi people have to choose this periphery as an entry point to continue to exist where constant risks of storms, floods, land erosion, etc. are common phenomena.

Failure of Promise





The conflict between the powerful (the state) and the powerless (the people) took place over maintaining environmental rules and ethics in the Sundarbans. Nilanjana Chatterjee has discussed the different perceptions of the state and people regarding the very important biospheric zone of the Sundarbans reserved forests. ⁹ Amitav Ghosh's novel, "*The Hungry Tide*", explores the political power of possession and dispossession, where the economically and politically weaker sections are brutally tortured by the police force. The novel describes how the government rehabilitated a large number of refugees in drought-stricken Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha, which is called the Dandakaranya belt (see Ghosh, Amitav 111-120)

During the 1970s, the most notable leftist politicians, like Jyoti Bose, Ram Chatterjee, and many more, went to visit the refugee camps in the Dandakaranya belt and assured them that if they won the election, the refugees would get a chance to settle in West Bengal. The refugees, naturally, thought the left was their ally. In June 1977, the Left Front Government came to power, but no one from the government seemed interested in following up on the promises made earlier to rehabilitate the refugees in West Bengal. They claimed that if the government did not return them to the Dandakaranya belt, they would be forced to return on their own and settle on Marichjhapi Island in Sundarbans.¹²

Dandakaranya to Marichjhapi Island

In the meantime, tensions spread in the Dandakaranya rehabilitation belt. Afterward, numerous Bangladeshi refugees from Mana camp took their oath with the signature of blood to settle in the islands of the Sundarbans under the leadership of *Udbastu Unnayan Samitee* (Refugee Development Committee) in 1975. More than 1.5 lakh Dandakaranya refugees were estimated to have fled to Marichjhapi island in March 1978. As soon as they reached the island, the police forced them down from the trains and made arrangements to send them back to Dandakaranya, though the attempt was unsuccessful. In this situation, the police forced them down. The government turned down their decision and denied the basic necessities to the refugees. However, 150,000 refugees secretly sailed to Marichjhapi Island. Amitav Ghosh has rightly expressed that Marichjanpi, there was a sudden intake of breath as Nilima said the word, yes, said Kanai. To me what happened there. Marichjhnapi, said Nilima, was a tide country island, a couple of hours Lusibary by boat. It fell within a part of the sundarbans reserved for tiger conservation, but unlike many such islands it was relatively easily accessible from the mainland. In 1978 a great number of people suddenly appeared in morichjhanpi. In this place where there



had been no inhabitants before there were now thousand, almost overnight (see Ghosh, Amitav 118). After that, friction, evictions, and struggles between the government and the refugees on the island started. After the partition, such conflicts between the refugees and the state took the form of a national crisis. The refugees wanted to settle in areas with favourable environmental conditions, whereas the government rehabilitated them into infertile areas, and they fought their own battles with sweltering summers, freezing winters, uncultivated land, and natives who spoke a different language (Halder, Deep 4-15). Thus, the refugees' cry for settlement in favourable areas was denied by the state due to the Reserve Forest Act.

The violent incident in Marichjhapi, in which over 100 people died, bears witness to the mass migration from Bangladesh into the Sundarbans and symbolises power struggles between the government and Sundarbans residents over forest rights. Yet, thousands of refugee men, women, and children reached Marichjhanpi Island on April 18, 1978, and many more would join them in the coming months. The refugees denied that they had destroyed forest trees. This was due to their lack of access to the dense forest, which contained only weeds and fire foods such as *garan* and *hetal*. In an open letter on 5th March, 1979, Raiharan Baroi, the Secretary of the *Udbastu Unnayan Samitee*, wrote in an open letter that Marchijhanpi is isolated from the main reserved forest by the conjunction of two big rivers, *Jhilia* and *Garal*. All three sides are open fields, devoid of forest resources and suitable for human settlements. On February 16, 1979, the same refugee leader wrote that there were no such trees at Marichjhapi in 1978. The trees that the refugees uprooted were mainly *garan* and *hetal* trees. The refugees proposed planting a forest on the banks of the rivers if they were allowed to settle there.¹⁶ They also pointed out that robbery of forest wood might be stopped if they could settle which, in turn, could increase the pace of forestation in the surroundings. An island like Marichjhanpi was not liked by the Royal Bengal Tigers, who always preferred a dense jungle of huge trees (see Ghosh, Alok Kumar 68). A report from the forest department itself stated that even if no human settlements were ever allowed on Marichjhanpi Island, only two tigers could be maintained there.

The refugee observation that newly raised Marichjhanpi land was suitable for *Garan*, *Konkoba Sundari*, and *Pasur* trees was, in fact, more or less correct. It was only on the banks of the rivers that some *Garjan* trees could be planted, which the refugees agreed to do. Nor were they very important in preventing the erosion of land. Obviously, an island like Marichjhanpi was not liked by the Royal Bengal Tigers, who always prefer a dense jungle of huge trees. A report from the forest department itself stated that even if no human settlements were ever allowed at Marichjhapi, only two tigers could be maintained there (see Ghosh, Alok Kumar 69).



Chaos and Conflict

By June 1979, refugees had built nearly 250-kilometer-long embankments, set up a *beedi*-making unit, a carpentry workshop, a bakery, a hosiery unit, a secondary school, and a cooperative society for farming and fishing. The famine-stricken people appealed to society to help them. The refugee organization "United Central Refugee Council" (UCRC) raised funds from various sources for the displaced people. However, both the West Bengal and Central governments prevented them from providing assistance. They repeatedly urged the government to reconsider its gesture.²¹ The government remained firm on its decision. They only demanded that they be allowed to stay at Marichjhanpi as citizens of the Union of India.²² They have distributed lands in Marichjhanpi amongst six thousand refugee families in the shape of *paras*, *villages*, and *anchals*. (See Ghosh, Amitav 117-119) Nearly a thousand families built their houses on different plots in a group system and have been residing there for about a year. Sunil Gangapadhyay's pioneering work on Marichjhapi Island in the Sundarbans has criticized the central government's rehabilitation plan for failing to alleviate the refugee problem from 1960 to 1965. That's why about 2 lakh refugees settled at Marichjhapi in the Sundarbans (Gangapadhyaya, Sunil 505) Because of their traditional survival strategies, a large number of refugees accustomed to living in the unstable territories with fear of animals and natural calamities. The men would fish in the numerous rivers and creeks of the Sundarbans and sell their products on the nearby Kumirmari Island (Ghosh, Drubajyoti 110-113) The large settlement at Marichjhanpi became, more or less, self-reliant. The men would fish in the numerous rivers and creeks of the Sunderbans and sell their products on the nearby Kumirmari Island. The women weaved and knitted and sold their garments. They had established factories for making bread and cakes as a source of income. The voluntary teachers started taking classes in the self-organized school. Settlers established a rudimentary desalination plant. (Jalais, Annu 3) Life on that island, according to those who lived there, was difficult but also enjoyable.

In the meantime, both governments, declared the refugee settlements an illegal encroachment on the forest lands reserved for bio spheric balance and the protection of endangered tigers. The Chief Minister of the State Assembly stated on February 10, 1979, that no further settlement anywhere in West Bengal would be allowed and all the refugees would be pushed back to Dandakaranya. At the end of December 1978, both the police and CPM cadres marched to Marichjhapi and then ordered the settlers to remove them from the island. A brutal police operation followed and took the form of seizing the island by the police launches, indiscriminately firing on the helpless poor, and forcing the sinking of the boats carrying refugee women and children on January 24th, 1979. Tension spread over the Sundarbans, and settlers



refused to leave the island. Marichjhanpi stood out as a prominent spot of defiance against the communist dictators, who could not tolerate the disregard for their *diktat*. Thus, the pressure on the settlers at Marichjhapi was increasing. On the morning of January 31st, 1979, a group of women (*Nishikanta-Girija-Phanibala*,) fought against the police firing. When they refused and continued rowing, the police rammed their mechanized boats. The women jumped into the water and swam away. But those who did not want to leave the land remained under police surveillance (Mallick, R 110-12). The government forced them to leave their Sundarbans by blocking their drinking water supply, food, clothing, etc. Finally, on the government's orders, the refugees were subjected to ruthless torture. On that day, many women, men, and children were killed by police firing. There was rape, murder, and poisoning. Numerous bodies were buried in the sea, countless were killed, even as some escaped, too afraid to tell the tale. At least 7,000 people, including many women and children, died at Marichjhanpi Island in January–May 1979 (Halder 7-8).

The declared reason for the forcible eviction of the refugees was "illegal encroachment on reserve forest lands." Annu Jalais observes the incident from a Dalit perspective. The government's primacy on ecology and its use of force in Marichjhanpi were seen by the islanders as a betrayal not only of refugees but of the poor and marginalised in general (Jalais 3) Thus, humanity died on that island in 1979 for the preservation of coastal wetlands. The survivors fled to other parts of the state, and many have now settled further in the vicinity of Calcutta's slums and other camp areas in West Bengal and Bihar.

The islanders were the agrarian class of the Ganges and Brahmaputra deltas of Bangladesh. Naturally, they did not adapt to the rock-lying land, deep forest, and fear of wild animals of Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, and Odisha. The rehabilitation on dry land showed them to be a curse. The camps in those states were culturally different from their motherland. Therefore, at the beginning of the rehabilitation, there was the question of whether the refugees would have a problem moving out of West Bengal for rehabilitation, but would be unwilling to settle down in the hill country or arid lands. Deep Halder in his book 'Blood Island' has explained that refugees did not ask the government for money, nor did they squat on other people's properties. They only wanted plain land in the Sundarbans to stay and survive. As a result of the unfavourable environmental conditions at the Raipur-Mana camp in Madhya Pradesh and other states, they were forced to relocate to the Sundarbans. The Sundarbans' human population grew rapidly in the post-colonial era, particularly after India's partition and the establishment of Bangladesh. The violent incident of Marichjhapi in the Sundarbans symbolises the struggles between the powerful government and powerless people (refugees and migrants) over land for forest rights. Following



Bangladesh's Liberation War in 1971, the population of the Indian Sundarbans increased from 1.15 million in 1951 to 4.44 million in 2011, increasing demand for its resources and degrading the sound ecological order. (Ghosh, Avijit 108). The core area of the forest has been converted to agricultural land and settlements. So, distressed Bangladeshi people were tormented brutally for the preservation of mangrove forests and tigers.

CONCLUSION

Two brief conclusions: First, the study does not interpret the historiography of environmentalism; rather, it investigates how eco-political problems emerged after post-colonial West Bengal. It's possible that the government prioritized the environment over Bangladeshi people when it came to preserving the Sundarbans ecosystem in a broader sense. On the other hand, refugees wanted a favorable land to survive, similar to where they lived before partition. So, different perceptions were born that turned into an environmental issue. Unfortunately, there was no national leadership; powerless people started the movement, which was brutally destroyed by state force. Secondly, almost all recent studies have neglected or at least discussed the relationship between "partition" and "environmentalism" in India as well as the countries of Southeast Asia. So, this study denotes some innovative hints and different perceptions in the field of environmental history for the future study.

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