

Space, Place and Identity: An Appraisal of Some Discursive Treatments of the Marichjhapi Massacre

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Any scholarship on the post-'70s Bengal is incomplete without delving into the killings at Marichjhapi, where anything from 2 to 10,000 refugees from erstwhile East Bengal, mostly belonging to the Namashudra community, were killed by the police and extra-legal personnel in 1979 under the directives of the CPI(M) leadership. It may be argued that many members of the Namashudra community are reluctant to be categorized as Dalits, citing their Bengaliness, their own anti-caste reformation initiatives, and their relative prosperity and independence even as manual agriculturists in the erstwhile East Bengal (Lily Haldar). Nevertheless, the Marichjhapi massacre can unqualifiedly be classified as state repression against Dalits because of their effective position as avarnas, their close and unmediated ties to the land and them being recipients of savarna Left violence. As Gopal Guru writes in the article 'The Politics of Naming':

Categories in political explanation enjoy a lifespan of their own. They travel alone along a path strewn with challenges and counter challenges, contradictions and their transcendence. That is why these categories and their labelling (naming) change meaning, connotation and significance over time and over space, depending on the politics of the users who create these categories. In other words, in the domain of politics, these categories do not acquire an arbitrary character. They are not aimless or passive representations of the world out there, but conscious constructions encoding either a positive or negative agenda (n.p.).

For this piece, I focused on Deep Halder's *Blood Island* not only because it is the first oral history book in English on the subject¹ containing interviews of the actual survivors and other participants, but also because of Halder's repeated identification with BJP causes and right-wing mouthpieces². The caste angle was vehemently denied by the then-ruling Communists even in cases where they did admit to some mishap, citing their own belonging to the earlier wave of East Bengali refugees (Halder's interview with Kanti Ganguly, the minister of Sunderbans affairs during the Marichjhapi incident). It may be briefly noted that in the Indian subcontinent, those of immigrant stock before the 90s tended to turn communists before becoming anything else, owing to the professed egalitarianism. Explicating this, subversive politics in Bengal is intricately linked to the management of space, not only geographical but also social. Before the Khilafat movement and the Tebhaga Andolan, the revolutionaries in pre-1920s India were from the upper rungs of the caste order. The much-celebrated voice apparently accorded to the 'downtrodden' in West Bengal in the political (as distinct from the social) functioning of the State has always been due to the overwhelming importance that Kolkata as a city has continued to occupy in the overall space of both East and West Bengal since the city's inception (Omvedt). While the administration was composed of overwhelmingly upper-caste English educated *bhdrolok*³, the very functioning of the city ensured that the management of the rest of the state was

¹There are quite a few works on Marichjhapi in Bengali, including those by Madhumay Pal and Shaktipada Rajguru, whose politics are markedly different from Halder's and who also include accounts of avarna survivors and witnesses.

²Even without resorting to extraneous evidence (of which there are plenty) of pinning Deep Halder as anti-Muslim, I would like to quote a part of the text to show that his rhetoric does pitch one minority against another: "It was not my intention to bring up Rehman's Muslim identity or the fact that Jyoti Basu was trying to play the religion card. But it is true that after 1977, the CPI(M) had built up a powerful Muslim lobby in various pockets of West Bengal, especially in the Basirhat-Hasnabad region where Muslims, for historical and economic reasons, were not favourably disposed towards the Hindu refugees of Marichjhapi" (Sukhoranjan Sengupta, interview with Halder, n.p.). It is not that there are never allegations of upper-caste Hindus and Muslims collaborating. This quote is in the context of Basu apparently prompting a Muslim leader from the Janata Part to speak against the Dalit refugees. My point is, the aforementioned powerful Muslim lobby, even if it existed, would have no effect on Marichjhapi matters unless the Communist party politburo itself acted on matters.

³The *bhdrolok* is a term used to denote the English-educated men centred on Kolkata and initially acquiring their wealth through associations with the British. Many came from the old landed gentry formed during the Mughal period.

conceived not specifically in terms of caste but of economy where the small lived realities of the rest of the state could be accorded a secondary position as much as possible. This in turn, proved to be a fertile point for the reception and subsequent flourishing of Communist and other Left-oriented ideologies.

This old understanding was upended by the extended arrival of the agrarian Namashudra refugees (among others) following Partition, and the overall numbers reached a tipping point with the Liberation War of Bangladesh (1971). Used for centuries to the Bengal greens which they had nurtured with their own hands, it was naturally impossible for the Namashudras to accept the infertile, inhuman conditions of the Dandakaranya refugee camp set up in Central India in the late 1950s. Those details can be found in any of the books on refugee-settlement or Marichjhapi. But continuing with the point, from the old Hindu non-acceptance of the Muslim Other to the actual trauma of the Partition and then the Liberation War, and the subsequent Left 'betrayal' (Halder, more on this soon), Marichjhapi has been a fertile node for right-wing rhetoric. And that people like Deep Halder are experienced journalists providing space in the public discourse is very important. But this leads to the question- is the pro-CAA, anti-Muslim BJP the only possible outlet for this rage and pain? I ask this here because the rhetoric of CAA is specifically premised on providing recognition to the much-abused Hindu Dalits.⁴ The BJP has a refugee cell in West Bengal and claims to be the only part caring for them in India today (*The Wire*). Also, Halder repeatedly locates the victims of Marichjhapi as Hindu refugees, which they were, but it is not clear how non-Hindus might have been treated better vis-à-vis them. I mention this because such a juxtaposition features repeatedly in Halder's book and its reception.⁵

To comment further on the importance of journalists for the Dalit cause, Ambedkar had said during the launch of *Mooknayak* in 1920: "The untouchables have no press." In the

⁴Sukriti Ranjan Biswas, All India President of the Joint Action Committee for Bengali Refugees, problematizes this in his interview with Dwaipayan Sen, while also advocating the NRC.

⁵In its review of *Blood Island, Swarajya* explicitly puts Dalit persecution as a consequence of supposed Left-Muslim alliance. In addition to the numerous appraisals of Halder's book by right-wing portals, the issues in the very book some of which have been dealt with here, and Halder's own social media presence (which has been considered extraneous to this paper), the BJP repeatedly brings up Marichjhapi to uphold its exclusionary citizenship policies (Outlook).

present Anand Teltumbde posits that in the over-reliance on identity representatives within the democratic mechanism, what is often overlooked is the importance of occupying a rung in the discourse- generating mechanism which should be ideally State-independent. He writes in *The Persistence of Caste*:

In 2006, the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) conducted a survey on the social profile of New Delhi's mediapersons. Of the 315 key decision-makers surveyed from thirty- seven Delhi-based Hindi and English publications and television channels, almost 90 percent of the decision-makers in the English language print media and 79 percent in television were found to be upper caste'. Not one of the 315 was a dalit or an adivasi; only 4 percent are OBC, and 3 percent are Muslims (who constitute 13.4 percent of the population) (137, 138).

It is not surprising thus that the media has little understanding or empathy for Dalits. Marichjhapi is only one incident illustrating the media's indifference. Halder writes: "Why such a wide gap? One reason is though the Bengali press sporadically covered the Marichjhapi story, the island is so far away from mainstream Calcutta and so difficult to access that what happened in Marichjhapi can only be reconstructed as oral history" (n.p.)

And while with the rise of independent online journalism post-2010 this picture has started changing somewhat, (and it can be further linked to the eventual fading out of the Dalit-only parties in the Indian election scene [Teltumbde]), what would it entail for the older generation, the survivors and their descendants in Bengal? In north India, there is the rise of young dynamic leaders like Chandrashekhar Azad and Jignesh Mevani. They are alternatives for the youth in their biggest grouse against a party like the BSP which, despite being given the chance for four terms straight after decades of hard work, failed in bringing about any effective change with its integrative, and thus often corrupt, policies. Amit Ahuja, an Associate Professor at the UCSB feels that Dalit votes spreading out across parties, like it happened with the Blacks once they became stakeholders in mainstream politics, might not be a bad thing after all as rather than depending on the success of just one party in Parliament, Dalits can now benefit from what he terms 'policy continuity' (*The Print*). This is not to suggest that the importance of identity in affirmative Parliamentary politics is over,

far from it, but with the emergence of a Dalit middle class, there is for the first time the possibility of an intersectional, rather than a strictly pyramidal, political expression, according to him.

Returning to Bengal, caste oppression is further complicated by the fact that citizenship by naturalization was unqualifiedly stopped post- March 1971. And the BJP at the moment is trying its best to override the fears of the Hindu refugees caused by the NRC-CAA. Which brings to the foreground land and dwelling as vortices of space, place and identity. They are pertinent to caste questions all the more because land grants have always been caste-influenced and insufficient, and embedded with local shoddiness. In the case of Marichjhapi, it is claimed that it was Jyoti Basu who in his well-guarded visit to Dandakaranyapromised Marichjhapi as a place for returning the Bengalis to Bengal (interviews of Niranjana Halder, Sakya Sen with Halder). While human habitation in protected regions is undesirable, the idea of untouched nature is often a dangerous myth in the twenty-first century. Rohkramer and Schulz in their paper 'Space, Place and Identities' write that space not only influences human beings, but is also influenced by human beings. Place is meaningful space, not a static concept of authentic existence, but where power is engaged and negotiated with in all its forms. This further leads to the questions- who decides what space to occupy? Who makes the claim of the original inhabitant? What are the grounds of indigeneity? For a community, how important is the national past? As is evident from the present list of required documents for NRC, a longstanding dwelling place of one's own is a prerequisite for citizenship. And the very act of building a dwelling itself is so integral in upholding caste divisions that even the British imbued the traditions of exclusion in their colonial buildings (Raees Muhammad). In the case of Marichjhapi, the immigrants and the police were equally persistent in constructing and destroying the dwelling places, respectively. The island had been a space in which the outcaste refugees, in their typical self-sufficient way, had tried to create a sense of place by replicating their lost fields (Halder). The police and the CPI(M) considered it a transgression against space marked for them- refusal of Dankaranya as physical space and refusal to join the CPIM-led United Central Refugee Council (Debjani Sengupta) as discursive space. This transgression would in turn provide them to some degree a privilege reserved only for savarnas (and 'original

inhabitants') till then- political space, and thus agency. Martha Gellhorn writes in *The Face of War*: "Citizenship is a tough occupation which obliges the citizen to make his own informed opinion and stand by it" (n.p.).

Dwelling place operates vis-à-vis citizenship at two levels: providing shelter is regarded as a duty of the welfare state, something which the State has actively utilised in votebank politics; claiming a space for themselves is seen as something which will naturally provide human beings with the rights of a citizen, as is demonstrated by slumdwellers, by the immigrants of Marichjhapi [Halder], in fact any of the dispossessed. These are always political acts. And visibility through those claims acquires added dimensions in the urban sphere, which is the apex of the bourgeoisie culture. Marichjhapi is easier to erase from public memory because it did not happen and was not allowed to enter the discourse in an urban space as important as Kolkata. In such cases, citing K. J. Anderson on Chinese immigrant communities in Canada, space becomes racialised. Caste atrocities often escape attention because they happen in villages. What makes housing so crucial to citizenship is its being the definitive claim to land, to the deciding factor of equality. Marichjhapi was almost an uninhabitable island having no framework whatsoever to contain or eradicate housing, and thus the aforementioned erasure from discourse was easier.

What makes Halder's treatment of the Marichjhapi issue worthy of this examination here is that it reflects on the debates regarding alliances like those of Dalits and Muslims, with claims of Ambedkar being anti-Islam (Daniyal). One must keep in mind that by no means incidents like Marichjhapi and other incidents of systemic caste oppression made all Dalits anti-left (Ranabir Samaddar). Marichjhapi is only one intersection of physical and discursive spaces which ironically demonstrates their deprivation among Dalits. However, what is unavoidable is the political affiliation of some of the people associated with providing space in discourse to the till-now voiceless. It is no mere accident that Mamata Banerjee felt compelled to fulfil her promises towards providing Dalits in West Bengal platforms of their own only in 2020. Texts like Halder's are important, his political affiliations notwithstanding. But a significant way to counter anti-Muslim politics, and the right rhetoric in general, is by allowing the Dalits with their own voice, and then engaging with each individual as an

intelligent and opinionated human being, rather than prescribing things top-down at best and eradicating them at worst.

Additional Notes

- The author of this article would like to thank Puja Senmajumdar, a PhD research scholar, for one particular input.
- This article resulted from an ongoing research on post-1965 Bengal by the author who is neither a caste studies scholar nor a member of the Dalit community. All possible mistakes are apologised for.

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