

Situating the Refugee: A Biopolitical Inquiry into Deep Halder's *Blood Island*

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Abstract

The paper uses the biopolitical framework conceptualised by Foucault and Agamben to critically examine the figure of the refugee and its representation in Deep Halder's *Blood Island: An Oral History of the Marichjhapi Massacre*. The book attempts to reconstruct the history of the Marichjhapi massacre in January 1979 through interviews with survivors, journalists, activists and government officials by unearthing the series of events leading to the massacre. This paper attempts to look deeper into the dynamics of power relations between refugees and the State. The paper attempts to show refugees as the modern-day homo sacer, homo sacer being the figure of 'exception' in ancient Roman Law. What makes one's life to be an exception? Who decides on the exception? How do refugee occupancies become exceptional spaces? The paper searches for answers to these questions. It also shows how the subversion of stereotypes associated with refugees is not only a challenge to the dominant constructions of refugees but also an act of reclaiming the humanity they lost with their political identity. This paper also studies the relevance of oral history as a counter-narrative to hegemonic discourses of history that constructs refugee as a threat and a life devoid of value.

Keywords: Biopolitics, Dalit Refugees, Homo Sacer, Resilience, Counter-narrative, Oral history

Introduction

This paper examines the figure of the refugee, its position in the biopolitical sphere and its representation in Deep Halder's refugee narrative in *Blood Island: An Oral History of the Marichjhapi Massacre*. The author tells the story of the Namasudra refugees who came from East Pakistan to settle in West Bengal. In January 1979, they were subjected to a

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massacre in Marichjhapi by the then Left Front government in West Bengal. Using the biopolitical theoretical framework given by Foucault and Agamben, this paper attempts to look into the dynamics of power relations in matters of refugees and refugeehood. It also shows how the refugee narrative subverts the stereotypes associated with refugees, thus challenging dominant constructions of the refugee. The paper begins with a brief discussion of biopolitics, the theoretical framework used for the analysis. Then, the paper presents a history of Namsudra refugees from erstwhile East Pakistan to West Bengal, India. The substantive part of the paper is devoted to analysing Deep Halder's *Blood Island* from the point of view of biopolitics. In conclusion, it highlights how the oral history of the Marichjhapi massacre challenges the metanarratives emerging out of the official history and how the State created a state of exception in dealing with Namsudra refugees in Marichjhapi.

Biopolitics: Theoretical Framework

Biopolitics is based on the idea that politics and life are closely linked. State politics centres on the life of the individual who is part of the collective. The right to life is the most basic and inalienable right of any human being. All nation-states include the right to live as a constitutional right. Article 21 of the Indian Constitution states: "No person shall be deprived of his right to life and personal liberty except according to procedure established by law". The State must preserve, protect and foster life. This places humans as the subject of politics. The biopolitical framework provides analytic tools to investigate how power relates to the lives of individuals. According to Foucault, biopolitical governmentality has the affirmative task of preserving life by ensuring proper healthcare facilities and providing security to the population. Foucault's paradigm is best explained in both *Society Must be Defended* and *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1* by "the right to make live and to let die" (Foucault 2003, 241) or power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death" (Foucault 1978b, 138). He places biopolitical modernity in a historical time and identifies the emergence of biopolitics as the threshold of modernity that marks the end of the rule of the sovereign. In his account of biopolitics, it is not through law but through norms that the State disciplines and achieves the goal of improved health, productivity and security. Foucault discusses how life-preserving biopolitics has inscribed within it "the power to kill and function of murder" (Foucault 2003, 254) with his discussion on "state racism" in *Society Must Be Defended*. This is a device adopted by the State to separate and eliminate those individuals who do not conform to the norm for the sake of social normalisation. Similarly, the idea of the "dangerous individual" in legal psychiatry (Foucault 1978a, 18) is extended to study all individuals in the biopolitical sphere so as to recognise and eliminate potential threats.

In his book, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Agamben problematises the affirmative functionality of Foucauldian biopolitics by identifying ambivalences and paradoxes in the functioning of liberal societies. He observes commonality in the way a totalitarian government and liberal democracy function. According to Agamben, biopolitics is integral to

sovereignty. Law allows the sovereign to suspend the law on which sovereignty is founded. This capacity of the sovereign to proclaim a state of exception makes it a structure of exception. Citing Karl Schmitt, he says that the sovereign is he who decides on the exception (Agamben 1998, 11). Every State has provisions for proclaiming a state of emergency wherein the rights of the individuals are suspended. This is an instance when the protector of the rights by law has the power to suspend the law.

Agamben quotes Pindar to explain the connection between law and violence. “The *nomos*, sovereign of all/ Of mortals and immortals/ Leads with the strongest hand/ Justifying the most violent.” (ibid., 30). Thus “the sovereign is the point of indistinction between violence and the law, the threshold on which violence passes into law and law passes over into violence” (ibid., 32). The potential for violence is built into the law. The essence of violence (state of nature) is present in the sovereign. It is in the state of exception, i.e., “a temporary and spatial sphere in which every law is suspended”, that the distinction between law and violence becomes blurred. This zone of indistinction inhibits every law. The state of exception is not a spatio-temporal phenomenon; it transgresses any consideration of place and time and gradually coincides with the normal order (ibid., 37-38). The decision to suspend law to enter into a zone of indistinction lies with the sovereign.

Agamben borrows the concept of *Homo Sacer* from the ancient Roman law to denote a figure who is placed on the exception. He/she is included in the political and legal order so as to be excluded. Since exception is a condition of exclusion whose precondition is inclusion, *Homo Sacer* is the man “who may be killed and yet not sacrificed” (ibid., 8). It is not permitted to sacrifice this man, yet he who kills him will not be condemned for homicide (ibid., 71). *Homo Sacer* is any individual whose life can be placed in valuation. The decision of value rests with the sovereign. The potential to label this life as “life devoid of value” is the originary function of the sovereign (ibid., 139). In other words, the production of the biopolitical body is the originary activity of the sovereign, making biopolitics a function of sovereignty as opposed to Foucauldian governmentality. A product of exception, the *homo sacer* is a legal construct to exclude him/her from legal protections and social existence. He/she occupies a “juridically empty space” which is spatially included within the boundaries yet outside the legal realm (ibid., 38), where exception becomes the norm. He equates *homo sacer* to the figure of a werewolf, a human who shapeshifts into a wolf on full moon nights either as a boon or a curse. This figure is included in both the human and animal species since the werewolf has both features but belongs to neither category because he is not exclusive to one particular group. This figure is similar to a bandit who is caught in a state of ‘ban’: the *homo sacer* is the human victim under the sovereign ban (ibid., 104).

The sovereign sphere is the sphere in which it is permitted to kill without committing homicide and without celebrating a sacrifice, and sacred life—that is, life that may be killed but not sacrificed—is the life that has been captured in this sphere”. (ibid., 83)

In other words, “the sovereign is the one with respect to whom all men are potentially [sacred lives], and *homo sacer* is the one with respect to whom all men act as sovereigns” (ibid., 84). *Homo sacer* is a vulnerable category whose status is determined by the sovereign. Stripped of political life, the *homo sacer* is the figure of bare life. Thus, “the production of bare life” is the originary activity of sovereignty.” (ibid., 83)

In contemporary politics, refugees represent the figure of bare life whose status is constantly defined by the sovereign structures of power. The sites of refugee settlements and camps are the ‘juridically empty spaces’. Caught in a precarious position, their legality and illegality depend on the decision of the sovereign. The paper looks at how this precarity is represented in the narrative.

History of Namasudra Refugees from East Bengal

A brief history of refugee flow from East Pakistan to India would help to understand the Marichjhapi massacre and related events. Bengal was divided into the Indian state of West Bengal and the Pakistani province of East Bengal (renamed as East Pakistan) in 1947. The first wave of refugees came during and immediately after Partition. They were the traditional upper-caste elite. This population of 1.1 million were largely middle-class people, agriculturalists and artisans (Chakrabarti 1990, 1). The minority Hindus were victims of violence in the Noakhali riots in East Pakistan. Although the Congress Party objected to the ‘illegal’ squatting of these refugees and tried to evict them, the refugees won the support of the opposition Communist Party. Faced with this resistance and the public sympathy they generated among their relatives and caste members, the Congress government acquiesced in the illegal occupations (Mallick 1999, 105). Although there was little animosity between Dalit Hindus and Muslims in East Bengal, there were occasional instances of communal tensions. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury (2022) give an account of the various riots in the 1940s in their book *Caste and Partition in Bengal*.

Around the mid-sixties came the second wave of refugees. The communal agitation peaked with the theft of the Prophet’s hair in Hazratbal shrine, Srinagar. This incident sparked the 1964 East Pakistan riots that killed Hindus in large numbers. It was estimated that 6 million people fled to India as refugees in the aftermath of the 1964 riots and the India-Pakistan War of 1965. As they were Dalits who lacked family and upper caste connections, unlike their middle-class counterparts, they were forced to accept the government policy of dispersing them to Dandakaranya comprising parts of Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, on the claim that there was insufficient land available in West Bengal (Mallick *op. cit.*, 105). However, the local tribal people in Dandakaranya did not approve of the refugee occupation of their land and often attacked their crops.

Jyoti Basu, then leader of the Communist Party, promised resettlement in West Bengal to the refugees in Dandakaranya ahead of the 1977 elections. After coming to power, when his government failed to keep the promise, the refugees themselves took up the mission of resettling in West Bengal on Marichjhapi Island, an island in the Sundarbans. They travelled from various parts of Dandakaranya to Hasnabad and then to Marichjhapi. The refugees transformed the uninhabited land into a thriving village ecosystem with its own micro-economy, despite the resistance from the government. The government alleged that the refugees were destroying the reserved forest. On 26 January 1979, then Left Front chief minister Jyoti Basu announced an economic blockade of Marichjhapi. In the following days, the island was constantly attacked. Huts were burnt, supplies were blocked, tube wells were poisoned, and women were raped. 31 January 1979 witnessed one of the most gruesome massacres and human rights violations of the refugees. The violence ensued until the government declared that Marichjhapi was cleared by the end of May 1979. Media and journalists were barred from accessing the island. According to the survivors and witnesses, somewhere between 5000 and 10,000 refugees were killed in the state-sponsored violence while the government claims there were fewer than ten victims.

The huge disparity in the number of deaths in the Marichjhapi massacre indicates how the Dalit refugees remain forgotten in history. According to Bandyopadhyay and Chaudhury, the resilience of the refugees did not end with the Marichjhapi incident. Despite the loss of a dream to claim a geographical territory for themselves, they rediscovered their selfhood by creating a spiritual space to feel a sense of belonging like Matua Mahasanga that was rejuvenated by the contributions of P.R Thakur and by resorting to literature which represented 'Suffering', 'Revolt', 'Negation' (of Brahmanical system), 'Ethnic discovery' (or discovery of Dalit identity), and 'Creation' (of a new Dalit present and future) for them. (Bandyopadhyay and Chaudhury *op. cit.*, 258, 261).

The third major influx of refugees into India came during the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 though most of them returned after the war. This paper centres on the condition of the Dalit refugees of the second wave and their life in Marichjhapi.

The Ambivalence of the Refugee Figure and Caste Identity

Deep Halder's *Blood Island* is based mainly on nine interviews. Among the interviewees, Safal Haldar, Manoranjan Byapari, Mana Goldar and Sukhoranjan Sengupta were refugees while Jyotirmoy Mondal was a human rights activist; Santosh Sarkar was a journalist; Nirranjan Haldar was a former communist and veteran newsman; Sakya Sen was a lawyer and Kanti Ganguly, former minister of the Leftist party. Through the narration of their individual stories, the writer's intention is not to establish the veracity of the incident but to give voice to their versions of the story, preserving their individuality. The history of the Marichjhapi refugees and their experiences are recounted and narrated by not only refugees but also people who

were closely and directly associated with them. The narrative covers the humanitarian, legal and political aspects of the issue. Sometimes, some details in the stories contradict each other, explaining the difference in how they understood the same event. The multiplicity of voices and versions proves the inadequacy of a single story to explain a historical event. The question “who is a refugee” asked by a refugee camp kid to a teacher, who is himself a refugee, is a question that Deep Halder directs towards each person he speaks to. The teacher becomes emotional. However, he repeats the definition given by the United Nations. This poignantly constructed scene has the powerful effect of showing the inadequacy and incompleteness of the definition to encapsulate the experience of a refugee.¹

Deep Halder’s narrative establishes the well-founded fear of persecution in East Pakistan. Since the clash has been historically documented, the exact facts and figures are not elaborated in the narrative. However, the readers are initiated to the unrest with Safal Halder’s memory of the riot:

There was a riot in 1964. Hundreds left from my village. I must have been fifteen or sixteen at that time...There were headless bodies on the road and limbless men and women hiding their horror inside dark rooms...A group of Muslim men attacked us with axes. I asked my wife to run as I tried to hold them back. I was staring death in the face but I wanted her to be safe. Two sharp blows fell on my head. I lost consciousness and dropped to the ground. (Halder *op. cit.*, 42)

The multiplicity in the sobriquet of refugees helps one locate a refugee’s position. With the change in perspectives and perceptions, the definitions of “homeless border-crossers” (*ibid.*, 28) change. This constant revision of identity points to the subjective experience and suggests the futility of categorisations. Deep Halder’s narrative gives definitions of refugees at various points of narration. “Looking at Mana, I thought a refugee was one who had no place to go” (*ibid.*, 3). ‘Who are we?’ Sukhchand (a teacher in Jyothirmoy Mondal’s narrative) asks. ‘We are humanity’s leftovers,’ the crowd shouts back” (*ibid.*, 29). Byapari identifies himself as “chotolok” (*ibid.*, 109) to suggest the scornful attitude of the socially/economically advantaged people towards Dalit refugees. They are also referred to as “encroachers” (*ibid.*, 99) and “squatters who wanted to occupy land illegally” (*ibid.*, 103). Sukhchand looks at the officials stocking up the trucks with refugees to move them to various camps in Dandakaranya: “They are transporting animals from one stable to another” (*ibid.*, 30). Stripped of any human traits, they are unable to see the human in them. In this process, the oppressed begin to identify themselves with ideas generated by the sovereign powers.

The refugees undergo three levels of oppression. First, they are victims of religious persecution in East Pakistan; second, they are non-citizens in the country they currently inhabit; and third, they are oppressed on the basis of their caste and class. Seldom recognised as refugees or asylum seekers, they are usually associated with the term ‘illegal immigrant’. This production

of illegal subjects refutes their claim to any legal right. Such labelling suggests that their existence itself is illegal, thus removing them not only from the juridico-political space but also from the community of human beings. The illegality of their existence produced through political definitions delimits the possibility of judicial and social protection.

The caste discrimination in the refugee issue is side-lined by mainstream discourse. The intersectional identity of the refugees as economically and socially disadvantaged aggravated their existence as a refugee. In *Blood Island*, Manoranjan Byapari talks at length about the caste politics and discrimination. Homogenisation of the refugee erases the diversity of the people and their experiences. Not all refugees from Bangladesh were arrested, detained, imprisoned or raped and burnt. The upper-caste refugees occupied Bijoygarh and Jadavpur in West Bengal. However, when the Namasudra refugees came to Marijchapi, the government found excuses to drive them away and kill them. Marijchapi survival was a story of a self-made diligent visionary community. This self-reliant image of the downtrodden Namasudra refugee did not fit into the stereotype of a weak mass of people seeking government help and awaiting charity and fulfilling the expectation of being servile and grateful throughout their lives. Through this narrative, an image of a self-built, capable individual is reconstituted. The disparity between the founding principle of the casteless, classless Left politics and its practice in the real world is exposed through the Marichjhapi massacre. “The Marichjhapi people didn’t want anything from the government; all they wanted was a place to stay” (ibid., 70). Manoranjan Byapari says, “the very idea of communists – as friends of the poor, darlings of the downtrodden – would be tarnished. The world would see that the poor could very well take care of themselves and ensure their own welfare, if only they aren’t stopped from doing so” (ibid., 112). As a party that has projected itself as working for the benefit of the downtrodden, the self-reliance of the settlers threatens its validity and purpose of existence. As the end goal of the ‘State’ is its own preservation, the state takes up measures to oppose this ‘imaginary’ threat. Therefore, it did not even permit humanitarian organisations like Ramakrishna Mission and Bharat Sevashram Sangha to extend help to the settlers.

The government’s apathy towards the refugee can be attributed to the refugees’ non-conformity to the mental image of refugees as helpless people needing salvation from the generous host. The government denies them subject status and agency, yet they are able to set up a model village in the swamps of the Sundarbans. This is perceived by the former as a threat: “This self-sufficiency was a threat to CPI(M)’s core policy – help the needy, the downtrodden, in exchange for their support, vis-à-vis votes” (ibid., 70). Halder cites Annu Jalais who expresses the perspective of the refugees: “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 marginalised in general, but also of Bengali backward caste identity” (ibid., 9).

Kanti Ganguly’s story reveals the government’s anti-refugee stance and casteist attitude. Ganguly, a minister in the Left Front government at the time of the incident, dismisses the

refugees' claim: "They were not refugees, but squatters who wanted to occupy land illegally" (ibid., 102). His deep-seated casteism is revealed when he identifies the upper caste refugees as 'udbastu' or refugee and Dalit refugees as illegal squatters. Refugees who already occupy a precarious status are doubly oppressed by not being recognised as 'genuine' refugees. This proves how only the sovereign can define the exception. Unlike other episodes, Halder presents Ganguly's narrative as an interview so that the readers understand how the politician dodges the question and twists figures. Questions in the interview are extrapolated as a project of questioning the history constructed by the power structures. Challenging the dominant discourse regarding the Marichjhapi incident, the author holds those in power accountable for their deeds. Through this episode, Halder exposes not only the covert caste sentiments of Ganguly but also the caste discrimination, anti-refugee and also anti-human stance of the government.

The Tortuous Search for a New Homeland

As a child, Mana Goldar, one of the narrators, hears "the refugees talk about the rain-fed, lush greens of 'Opar Bangla', the joy of speaking in the mother tongue and not having to learn the coarse Hindi of central India and gorging on fresh fish from the river with steaming hot rice" (ibid., 85). Jyotirmoy Mandal says that Sukhchand, the teacher of the makeshift school, intersperses his lessons with tales of their lost homeland in East Pakistan. They intensely desire to live in a territory similar to East Bengal. In Jyotirmoy Mondal's narration, he recounts the story of Sachin and Sukhdev. Sachin, in his sleep, envisions his home. "In his sleep, Sachin swims back to the shore, to their village that sits by the river Madhumati. There, under the shade of big trees, is Gayan's house... And the village wise man's, the one who had warned against such a long journey" (ibid., 22). The narrator focuses on details so that warmth can be contrasted to the unpleasant encounters in India. The thought that they can no longer celebrate Durga Puja in their home brings "despair in Ranga-bou's eyes" (ibid., 23).

The reason that they initially chose to stay back in East Pakistan was their bond with the land they tilled because it was part of their cosmos: "Firmly attached to the soil of their homeland for livelihood, they did not leave their homes as swiftly as the upper caste Hindus" (ibid., 13). Despite the difference in religion, the Dalit Hindus and Muslims shared a common occupation, lifestyle, language and cultural fabric. It is this familiarity that they call 'home' rather than the physical land they occupied. However, there is no generalising view of a home. The concept of home varies from person to person. For Kalachand, it [camp] became his home. When someone says to the refugees, "'Go home, now.' 'Home,' Sukhchand lets out a laugh. 'Home, indeed!'" (ibid., 30). The narrative problematises the idea of home. The reader is provoked to consider whether a home is where one currently stays or where one feels a sense of belonging. For Mana, the refugee camp is her home. Her identity is strongly tied to the Mana refugee camp. It also shows that the refugee's identity cannot be erased even years after resettling in a country.

There are multiple ways in which refugees are portrayed as threats. In the case of Marichjhapi, the state projected the refugees as threats to the ecosystem of the Sundarbans. Accusing them of the felling of trees turned public opinion against them. This was how the former minister Ganguly justified the police action on the Marichjhapi settlers: “They thought that the Left Front was unfairly denying them settlement on that island. But how can you overlook the ecology? Can you strike a compromise with nature – can you become its enemy and hope for the human race to survive?” (ibid., 107). In other words, Ganguly creates a binary between the survival of the “human race” and the survival of the settlers. With great values attached to the former, the latter becomes “life devoid of value” (Agamben *op. cit.*, 139).

Similarly, Justice Basak dismissed the refugees’ claims on the grounds that Marichjhapi was part of a reserved forest and they did not have the right to settle there (Halder *op. cit.*, 79). Is this a justification for the extra-judicial killings? When it was later found that the area was not actually a reserved forest, no one involved in the incident was punished, showing how the refugee as homo sacer can be killed with impunity. The author also quotes a report published in the *Economic and Political Weekly* aptly titled ‘Dwelling on Marichjhapi: When Tigers Became “Citizens”, Refugees “Tiger-Food”’ (ibid., 9). It highlighted how the government considered tigers as “citizens” with rights and the refugees as people with no rights. Devoid of value, the refugees become tiger food. The concepts of community and sovereign protection prevail only as long as the outsider is perceived as a threat. Ironically, the people who see the fragility in the ecosystem (ibid., 104) and the economy (ibid., 107) are oblivious to the fragility and vulnerability of human beings.

Blood Island exposes the concern over ecology as a lie through multiple voices and reports later suppressed by the government. According to Safal Halder’s account, they were vilified without any reason.

I don’t remember the exact day or month, but sometime in the middle of 1978, we hired boats and set off for Marichjhapi ... There was a thick forest of useless shrubs and, unlike the rest of the Sundarbans, there was no plantation in the island. So it was a bloody lie told by the Left Front government that we destroyed a reserve forest to set up home in Marichjhapi. There was nothing to destroy! (ibid., 44-45)

The government also alleged that the refugees destroyed the coconut plantation on which it had spent a huge amount of money. Sukhoranjan Sengupta’s narrative questions this allegation. While working as a journalist with *Anandabazar Patrika*, he reported that although the refugees cleared some of the trees in the Jhupi jungle to make homes, they did not harm the coconut plantation: “They hadn’t cut even a single coconut tree. Even the forest officials praised the discipline of these men” (ibid., 70). Niranjana Halder adds that fishing was the refugees’ primary occupation; therefore, they had not exploited the forest resources (ibid., 67). Although Niranjana Halder and Mana Goldar admit that the refugees did fell a few trees,

the reason for clearing off the refugees was not ecological concern (ibid., 69, 90). Moreover, no legal action was initiated against the police who poisoned the water source of the hospital inside the island. That this unlawful act did not merit the government's attention despite all evidence is proof of Niranjana Halder's words: the reason was politics, not ecology (ibid., 69). Since the dominant discourse constructs the refugee as a threat to valued life, *Blood Island* attempts to resituate the refugee in the human sphere. Deep Halder's literary and historical project challenges the political project of dehumanising the refugee. There are many ways in which this self-narrative achieves the "humanising" project. This objective is achieved by exposing their vulnerability as humans, portraying their ability to participate in economic activities and live in the social order. Every human has the potential to be wounded, making him/her vulnerable. This vulnerability impels humans to find shelter that protects them from weather conditions and animal attacks. "Vulnerability is a permanent status of the human being whereas finding oneself helpless depends on circumstances" (Butler 2004, 31)

Another strategy to 're-humanise' the refugee is by focusing on their ability and their need to live as social beings as part of a community. This includes celebrating festivals, engaging in agricultural practices and setting up families. Festivals are celebrated despite the uncertainty of their survival. Festivals are part of their collective memory and a way to reclaim their own selves. Living with the sense of a lost cosmos, festival pujas help them connect with their identity. "It is time for the ten-armed goddess Durga's arrival.

Family is considered as the foundational unit of a society. Portrayal of individuals falling in love, marrying, having sex and begetting children has been shown many times in the narrative. "Our people got married, had children and lived the remaining days of their lives dreaming of a lost home" (ibid., 43). Every form of life and possibility of life are motifs of hope in the narratives. "Ranga-bou is with child again. The feeble sapling she had planted outside their tent is beginning to take the sturdy shape of a tree" (ibid., 28). Despite the limitations, the ability to adapt to the situation and survive challenges the idea of 'life devoid of value'. However, Deep Halder is not oblivious to the faults of the refugees, though his approach is sympathetic. The desire for revenge when their women are raped, and anger when their crops are destroyed are part of natural emotions. It is in the restraint to commit violence that he places their humanness.

Refugees are presented as agriculturalists and entrepreneurs, challenging the image of helpless and weak refugees. Agriculture is often seen as the first sign of civilisation. Halder gives ample importance to the crops and the means used in the cultivation to show them as civilised people. Through this first step, they present themselves as social beings capable of working together and living in a society. The stories of building an agricultural community and a model of micro-economy are told in the narrative. Agriculture becomes the metaphor for self-reliance and progress.

To consider them as liabilities waiting for charity or government support is erroneous. As people with no capital, both in economic and social terms, the plea for initial support cannot be used to paint a picture of refugees as burdens to the government and society. “What will they eat in Marichjhapi? How will they build homes, till land and grow crops?” (ibid., 37). The survival skills include tactics and techniques ranging from keeping the employer in their favour to bribing the police officials. The expectation of gratitude from a refugee is subtly mocked when the refugee expresses his gratitude to the employer. “At the end of the day, he bends in gratitude as Enamul counts his pennies – it is important to show gratitude and keep the employer in good humour” (ibid., 37). A refugee is expected to be more grateful than any other employee because society thinks letting them work and earn is a favour. Many self-writings of refugees either conform to these expectations like Ang Do’s *Happiest Refugee* or challenge these expectations like Dina Nayeri’s *Ungrateful Refugee* (2019) and Clemantine Wamariya’s *The Girl Who Smiled Beads* (2018). Sometimes, the autobiography itself becomes a tribute to the “help” of the host country. Although it is not wrong for refugees to acknowledge the help they receive, the expectation of unconditional gratitude for giving them what they are entitled to is questioned in the narrative.

Apart from agriculture, it was through sheer determination and will that the refugees created a home for themselves in West Bengal. Because they received no support except for help from a few humanitarian individuals, Marichjhapi was a testament to the refugees’ will and resilience. “We cleared shrubs, evened land and began town planning in all earnest. The more intelligent amongst us made a site map for a village housing society; we called it Netaji Nagar” (Halder 45). It became a fully functional community. Safal Halder’s recollection foregrounds the refugee as a responsible person who desires self-reliance.

And we did. Over time, the population of Marichjhapi swelled to 40,000 from the initial 10,000. It had become a functional village with three lanes, a bazaar, a school, a dispensary, a library, a boat manufacturing unit, and a fisheries department even! Who could have imagined that so much was possible in so little time? Maybe all those wasted years in Dandakaranya had given us superhuman will. (ibid., 45)

Deep Halder quotes Sukhoranjan Sengupta to highlight the diligence of the refugees. “There was a war-like effort amongst the refugees to make the island their home. They sold their harvest and other commodities at lower prices than in the market” (ibid., 58). Sengupta describes how they carried them all the way to the Bagna fish market where they could fetch more money (ibid., 58).

State-Sponsored Violence: Cleansing of the Island

In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben says that no crime against the refugees is counted as a crime since they lie beyond the protection of the juridico-political sphere (Agamben *op. cit.*, 171).

Rather than locating a specific perpetrator, the whole system is oppressive to the refugees. At various points in time, the police act as temporary sovereign. The irony of this situation is expressed in Niranjana Halder's words: "Who would imagine that these very people would not only refuse them land, but kill them mercilessly when they refused to follow the state's arbitrary orders?" (Halder *op. cit.*, 69). The state of exception does not operate on law but on "arbitrary orders" woven into the law as an exception. In the juridical-legal sphere, the power to detain or send people to prison lies not with the police but with the courts. Detention is limited by time by law. Since the refugees are placed in a state of exception, such illegal detention by the police becomes normalised.

The examples included in the narrative are of Sukhchand who spent a month in jail (*ibid.*, 34), Safal Halder who was kept in police custody for four days and later transferred to Alipore Central Jail for twenty-seven days (*ibid.*, 48) and several other unnamed refugee activists who were arrested for prolonged periods. The state of exception is not a spatial-temporal exception; it transgresses the limits of territory and time to coincide with the normal order. Safal Halder says, "My leaders told me I'd have to tell people in Calcutta how Marichjhapi has been turned into a police state" (*ibid.*, 46). From an exceptional occurrence, arrests and attacks become the norm in the sites where refugees live. Safal Halder recounts the events that happened on 14 June 1979. "The police came, set fire to our huts and forced the remaining ones out of the island. It was the end of the Marichjhapi dream. One year of dying by the dozens, yet carrying on with fire in our souls" (*ibid.*, 49). The massacre on 31 January 1979 is described in almost all chapters. While writing about Santosh Sarkar, the author says, "What Sarkar could not imagine, even in his worst nightmare, was that 31 January 1979 would leave him a paralytic for the rest of his life" (*ibid.*, 93). Police rammed into the boat carrying the women who wanted to cross the island to bring food supplies. According to Jyotirmoy Mondal,

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". (*ibid.*, 8)

The frequency of attacks shows how state-sponsored violence became a norm in the spaces the refugees occupied. By labelling them as "encroachers", the act of burning down an island could be presented as legitimate.

Another point of consideration is the increase in the number of rapes in Dandakaranya and Marichjhapi. Rape is a violation of a woman's body. In a social context that links a woman's body to the honour of family and community, violating the female body has the function of violating the entire community. As feminists have pointed out, the body is a site where power

is contested. In the narrative, Haripada Debnath says that during Basu's governance, rape was used like a weapon of war against the dissenters (ibid., 115). Sukhoranjan Sengupta tells how the police were proud of their actions. "The policemen boasted to me that only the armed forces could have cleared Marichjhapi the way they did" (ibid., 52).

Apart from the direct attacks, they also resorted to poisoning the water resources that the refugees had accessed. Such indirect attacks exposed them to death. Non-stop police action had demoralised islanders. "One night, someone came and dropped a bottle of poison into the tube well. Thirteen people died the next day. Babies were dying like rats from diseases, and women were afraid to venture out for fear of being raped by policemen." (ibid., 48) The idea of medical citizenship is in debate in contemporary times. The government's refusal to allow people to get treatment is also a type of governance. "After much outcry, with two babies and an old man dead, a city doctor finally comes to examine the patients. Are lives so cheap around here?" (ibid., 28) The cheapness of life is indicative of the disposability and dispensability of their lives. Babies, women, and old people are considered vulnerable worldwide. However, the belief that the more vulnerable groups of people would be spared is a wrong assumption, at least in the case of refugees, as Santosh Sarkar recounts the events of 31 January 1979.

Our leaders, Satish Mondal and Rangalal Goldar, said women would row boats to the next island to fetch clean water and grains, as well as medicine for the sick. Surely, the police launches would not ram into boats carrying women...But we were proven wrong. Those bastards in police uniforms did not care for our women either. They rammed their launches into the boats and drowned all three boats. (ibid., 94)

The prolonged economic blockade at Marichjhapi was a violation of the economic rights of an individual. When the court gave an injunction order against it, "instead of giving a legal reply to our application, or get the case heard at the first instance, as is the legal norm, they sent in their goons and burnt down the entire island" (ibid., 76). The government's power to surpass all kinds of opposition to their stance is similar to the sovereign's survival as the end goal of sovereignty. This exception from the "legal norm" brings into question the state of the refugees.

However, refugees are victims not only of physical harm and abuse. They suffer from the pain of homelessness and the uncertainty of settling elsewhere. Although the Left party promised resettlement in West Bengal when they were in opposition, it was never fulfilled. The sense of betrayal by the Left was coupled with police brutality, economic blockade and burning of the village. Loss of the cosmos or familiar space is presented as the main reason for their psychological pain of displacement. Even when their life took the natural course in Dandakaranya and other transit camps, losing their familiar landscape and culture remained

a great wound in their minds. “Our people got married, had children and lived the remaining days of their lives dreaming of a lost home. But somewhere, amid all this, we were losing our identity as Bengalis. There was a gnawing fear that if not our children, then their children after them would not speak our beautiful language” (ibid., 43). The fear of losing their self by losing their claim to familiar Bengal became stronger in the refugee adults.

Conclusion

Deep Halder calls the narrative an “oral history” that challenges the hegemonic, dominant written history. By terming it so, Deep Halder proposes the need to pass it to posterity. The preface of the book begins with the need to include the Marichjhapi massacre and the story of the refugees erased from the metanarratives of history. The narrative shows scepticism towards the totalising nature of metanarratives. The very act of telling the story is an act of resistance – resistance against the production of ‘truth’ by the state and the public discourse it perpetuates. This resistance is an effort to bring out the truth from the refugees’ side and reject the truth imposed upon them. Foucault (1980, 93) says, “We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth.” The narratives of five inhabitants of Marichjhapi who were first-hand witnesses of the Marichjhapi ordeal speak up to the power to produce truth.

Equating his narrative with the oral history genre allows the writer to record the statements without the need for documentary evidence. It is not an evasion of truth but an attempt to record the story of the post-partition refugees as they saw it. It records their subjective experiences and memories, as opposed to the presumed objectivity of official history. When he enquired about the number of deaths in the massacre from the police, he got a number of less than ten, while the refugees insisted the number was anywhere between 5000 and 10,000. “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” (Halder *op. cit.*, 18). The truth is between “manufactured lies and stifled cries” (ibid., 18). The impetus of telling the stories is to make the incidents stay alive in the public memory without limiting the story of the horrors to the collective memory of the refugees.

Blood Island is a testament to how the “shining example of the entrepreneurial spirit of a band of Bengali Dalits became a forgotten story of one of the worst pogroms of post-Independent India.” (ibid., 12). These Dalits were refugees whose rights were suspended by the will of the sovereign, the State. The refugee figure is a *homo sacer* stripped down to just bare life but devoid of juridical protections, it can be killed. The refugees’ persecution in East Pakistan forcing them to flee to West Bengal, and the horrors of their existence in Bengal and Dandakaranya in India – finally leading to the 1979 carnage in Marichjhapi in Sunderbans – bear witness to the full display of biopolitics. Their killing is not extra-judicial as they don’t exist in the juridical space. The island was thus cleansed without any jurico-

political accountability. The narratives painfully documented by Deep Halder present a powerful commentary on the state of exception that the refugees were subjected to. It reminds us of the link between biological life and politics and how modern democracies are embedded with strong totalitarian tendencies. These narratives needed to be told.

Notes

1. A refugee, as defined by the United Nations, is someone who is unable or unwilling to return to his/her country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion (UNHCR 1951, 3); while an asylum seeker is “someone who has applied for protection as a refugee and is awaiting the determination of his or her status” (UNESCO 2017). Since India is not a signatory to the UNHCR, the strict classifications of these ‘illegal’ immigrants, who have fled from their homelands due to the threat of life without proper documents and passports, does not hold much importance. However, there are certain gaps in understanding a refugee or asylum seeker. The process of establishing oneself as a refugee is legally complicated. Apart from the inability of the legal and quasi legal structures to document this process, there is also the lack of clarity in the position of a refugee and its relationship with the country of asylum. This inadequacy of definitions and means to understand refugee experiences is attempted to be compensated by literature

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