

## Revisiting Marichjhapi-the Unfolding of a gruesome history of dislocation & disintegration in Deep Halder's "Blood Island" & Vijay Gaur's "Aalokuthi"

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### Abstract

Forgotten lands, islands, spaces or memories do resurface in discourses in due course of time as they contain in them realities hidden; realities that persevere and wait for the recuperation/healing of the wounds silently oozing out of memories. A Social and Political Management of history renders a control over the archive thereby manipulating facts or circumstances. It handles the showcasing of realities or falsities as per its convenience establishing the truth that Knowledge is never neutral. Seeking such archives is essentially an attempt to interrogate the past and the present for the wrongs done, pains inflicted or injustices propagated by the use of social and political machinery. Deep Halder's *The Blood Island* is an oral history of the Marichjhapi Massacre, written after meeting, documenting, interviewing those who suffered direct consequences of a state-sponsored, administration-assisted massacre. Quite obviously, it is oral because it went undocumented, unregistered, misrepresented, unrecorded, misinterpreted and simultaneously erased hastily from the official records as the administration managed a monitored silence over the breaking down into pieces of a large section of humanity.

In this paper, I propose a reading into Deep Halder's book *Blood Island* and Vijay Gaur's *Aalokuthi* written in Hindi as they capture the agony, anxiety and hopelessness of around 1.5 lakh Hindu refugees from Bangladesh who had settled in Marichjhapi, an island in the Sundarbans, to start their lives anew. This ill-fated settlement saw brutal uprooting by the ruling west Bengal government in may 1979, just one year after its settlement in 1978.

Both the books are an attempt to unearth the truth behind one of the most controversial atrocities in post-independence India that was not covered by media, the newspapers went silent as the state did not want its intentional negligence towards a vast section of people get exposed. As Ghosh writes in "The Shadow Lines", "Nobody knows, nobody can ever know, not even in memory, because there are moments in time that are not knowable." The state government used

every coercive measure to suppress any rebellion or voice coming from the oppressed or from “the humanity’s left-overs” that the crowd of refugees has named themselves. Eventually and systematically, they had become “history’s left-overs.”

While journalist Deep Halder reconstructs the buried History through his interviews with survivors, erstwhile reporters, government officials and activists with a rare combination of courage, conscientiousness and empathy; Vijay Gaur’s *Aalokuthi* in the form of a novel is a narration of actual events, incidents that happened in Marichjhapi. History can be known in the form of narratives i.e., texts and all history writing is about interpreting the past for the sake of the present as it is time the wrongs done are undone and not get repeated. Both the books, in their own way, help bring the Marichjhapi massacre from the fringes of history to mainstream public conversation.

**Key Words:** Marichjhapi, Displacement, Dislocation, History, Disintegration, Grief, Atrocities, Coercion, Trauma

“Rebellions were begun by people who had not read Das Capital or the Red Book. It was their reality that had urged them into rebellion.” Deep Halder’s *Blood Island* begins with this quote by the Dalit Writer and Marichjhapi survivor, Manoranjan Byapari whom the journalist had approached for an interview. *Blood Island* is an oral history which is plausible as the written records are insufficient as the political will maneuvered to regulate and control its history. In his Preface to the *Blood Island*, Deep Halder states, “The real story of Marichjhapi is buried somewhere between manufactured lies and stifled cries. I revisited those I have known for years, met new people who still carry those hurts in their hearts. Putting pen to my reporter’s notebook, I have written down fragmented memories of these women and men who got sucked into the Marichjhapi story.”

The novel *Aalokuthi* by ‘Vijay Gaur’ begins with a line in Bangla, “*Bhookha Manush dhoro Boi, ota tomar hathiyaar*” (Find a hungry man as he could be your weapon). In his book, Vijay Gaur has recollected all the stories he had been told in the process of his work and travel to bring forth a reality that uncovers shocking details of unspeakable horrors and the stiff resistance offered against all odds. The above statements strongly emphasize upon hunger as a cause for there is

nothing more real than hunger or a rebellion. Realization of reality, rather an ultimate reality, which is culturally and socially perceived in context of space and time, is the most vital and active phenomenon that goes into the creation of narratives that are eye-opening, consciousness-raising, forceful and genuine. When Reality manifests itself through stories or memories using images, symbols and metaphors, paradoxes and rhetoric pertaining to real-life situations; various discrepancies, severities and flaws resurface making art a weapon against multifarious, unmarked injustices and violence. This reality and art jointly demand the need of ultimate representations, furthering discourse and debate in the arena of public sphere to register protest against the dictatorial social or political norms and practices that have been exclusionary and discriminatory breeding tremendous discontentment and perpetual hatred amidst one segment of the society against the other. The social reality is a truth that is 'incomplete' and 'partial' painted in red or black showing the violence and hatred propagated by the system causing disintegration and death of values and morals in the social sphere. Marichjhapi reveals a past that was distorted by the grim reality of deprivation, hopelessness, anguish, pain, anger and grief where darkness inhabited all the three - physical, material, mental spaces; despair became the order and habit of life and liberation was possible only through death.

Manoranjan Byapari's statement shows a rupture that had affected political leadership, making it difficult for the newly independent nations to present a unified front both domestically and internationally. Marichjhapi comes to Deep Halder in the form of a story through Mana, whom he has seen as a "distant relative" living in his home. It is a time when 'Rape' and 'Refugee' are words spoken in a hush hush voice in adult conversations in the house with reference to Mana. Mana is named after the camp in Raipur where her parents were sent after East Bengal became a country for Muslims. As Halder writes, "They travelled miles to cross the border, hoping that people who looked similar and spoke the same tongue would open their homes and hearts to them, only to be pushed into the hot, humid north." In the philosophy of the Czech philosopher Jan Patoeka one can find the outlines of dwelling, where the categories of acceptance, and implicitly hospitality, play a central role. For Patoeka the first movement of human life is that of self-anchoring', we first of all need a place on earth to stay, to be able to 'sink roots', to settle down:

“As moving beings, we are drawn to something that is motionless, that is eternally the unshakeable ground- the earth. The earth is the referent of bodily movements as such, as that which is not in motion, which is firm... It is a power also as the earth feeds us, something that penetrates us globally. By our nature, by the structuring of our life, we are earthlings. The corporeity of what we strive for in our life testifies to the power of the earth in us.” (Patoeka, P. 149) The image of planting bottleguard seeds outside their tent by Rang-bou in the reminiscence of Jyotir moy Mondol is the same striving to get a patch of earth to settle in. She turns a tent into a new home and the feeble sapling she had planted outside their tent is beginning to take the sturdy shape of a tree. There are other families who have grown vegetables around their tents, pumpkins and chilies, onions and gourds, in an attempt to camouflage the barrenness of their refugee lives. As long as we have not settled down, we are, in a fundamental way, only incomplete human beings. We therefore desperately seek to sink roots somewhere, to find a place where we are accepted, a home. It gives a brief consolation and peace to find Jogeshwar Dihi transit camp as a mini sea of humanity where people live and die, couples mate, marriages break, widows find solace in the willing arms of married man. Nothing is too personal or too sacred for this herd of homeless border-crossers”. The picture clearly states that it is only through acceptance by others that we somehow manage to overcome the trauma of separation, caused in us by the painful fact of being born into this world.’ The acceptance of the newborn into human warmth compensates for the separation of the body, for bodily individuation’. It is crucial then, at this stage to find not just a place, but a friendly place, a smiling face ready to accept and help us, to offer us shelter. Otherwise life is seriously threatened:

“The possibility of life is the possibility of this warmth, of this reciprocal smile, of this prevenient acceptance under protection which is simultaneously a placing of our own being into the hands of another, a nearness which does not assume anything alien, in spite of diversity. That means that life is only possible as already entering prepared warmth, in the passivity of being penetrated by the state of acceptance, and so only on the basis of a past that lets us lower an anchor, sink roots. (Patoeka, P. 264)

From Mana, they got transported to Marichjhapi. Marichjhapi is witness to the crude reality of dislocation, disintegration, destruction and death that resulted due to non-acceptance. It is an island in the sundarbans, located about seventy-five kilometers east of Kolkata where 1.5 lakh

Hindu refugees came to settle from refugee camps in Central India. By dint of hard work and surmounting perseverance these people transformed this no man's land into a bustling village. "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? May be all those wasted years in Dandkaranya had given us superhuman will." Wallerstein states that, "No, it is not oppression that mobilizes masses, but hope and certainty- the belief that the end of oppression is near, that a better world is truly possible." (Jefferson, P.49) They had cleared the mangroves to build huts and badhs. They are underprivileged and marginalized, landless and are usually at the receiving end of all the violence, injustice and humiliation, inflicted by the government. They inhabit an island with thick mangroves, man eating tigers, snakes, sharks, crocodiles and huge tidal waves, rising in the ebb and flow of water foreboding death yet the political set-up does not permit them even a subhuman living condition where surviving the environment itself is a great challenge. In the words of Sukhoranjan Sengupta, "I was amazed to see how this motley bunch of nowhere men and women had transformed the island." (P.87).

While Halder in his *Blood Island* gives specific names and locations viz., *Malkangiri*, *Marichjhapi*, *Mana*, *Dudhkundi*, *Jogeshwar Dihi* as it is a true atrocity narrative from history; Vijay Gaur gives a fictional name, *Aalokuthi* to all these dismal spaces that rein the memories of their descendents till today. *Aalokuthi* doesn't exist in the official map yet it is felt everywhere in the Sundarbans and Marichjhapi (a bush of chili). *Aalokuthi* is a story that trembles and screams to come out of the darkneses of history, a history that took place in the real geography of the Sundarbans. *Aamra kothay Jabo* (where will we go?) is a question that is unnerving, looming large in the minds of the exiled when the Government on the pretext of saving the environment, barricaded the settlers and tried to evict them by force. *Aalokuthi* is a living account of the search for rootedness in the face of a traumatic exile.

There are two different people; different situations but both meet the same fate. In *Aalokuthi*, it is Roopen Halder who is informed of the Government's plan of eviction that it is categorized a restricted land by the forestry. Sukhchand of the *Blood Island* trembles as he comes to know of the eviction drive. Trains are ready, the government babus have announced, to take them to

Dandkaranya. The Dandkaranya project area is 7, 678 square kilometers of land stretching from the districts of koraput and kalahandi in Orissa to Bastar in Madhya Pradesh. It is the same place where Rama was banished for fourteen long years. Vijay Gaur says that Dandkaranya is a place where many like Bani, (a character in Aalokuthi) live and they are quite a number. The reality hidden inside those huts across the railway-lines is not refined rather too coarse and so; author per se, need not be searched for. There are many like Bani who move in and around police-stations, courts and district offices to find a proof of their own identity. All queued up for water, electricity or trains that can transport them to some other places. And the number of these queues is uncountable. It is a kind of prison as any person who wants to get away was haunted down. Now, camps have been set up for these Bengali refugees from East Pakistan. If they don't move, the cash dole will stop.

'Who are we?' Sukhchand asks.

'We are humanity's leftovers,' the crowd shouts back. (P.37). An entire crowd feels and suffers a sense of loss, disintegrated in mind, spirit and body, thus, choosing and naming themselves in a resistive, reductionist way. This is how the marginalized respond to a systematic oppression, by donning the armor of language, vocabulary, signs, symbols and images before partaking in violence of any kind. The identities emerging out of crises in the face of humanity have dispiriting names bearing an imprint of the disorientation that the community faced in the course of its survival. Deep Halder in the beginning of *The Blood Island* says that as a boy he could not decipher the meaning of "refugee" or "rape" as a boy in Sukhchand's temporary school asks him the meaning of "refugee". The boy had wandered in a locality nearby and thirsty after a long walk, knocked at a door asking for water. The woman, who had come out, looked at him with a scorn and told her mother-in-law that he did not 'look' like a refugee. How does a refugee look like as per the register of dominant class? Was the look of scorn given by the woman a marker of identification and segregation? This stigmatization brings to mind Oscar Lewis's phrase, "Culture of Poverty" to describe behavioral maladjustments viz., hopelessness, despair, ineffectiveness that prevented the marginalized to get/feel uplifted in social values, order and goals. (p.76) The anti-accommodationist stance of the dominant class quite blatantly severe the possible growth of organic relationship based on the ethics of care and compassion with the under-privileged refugees.

Sukhchand informs his pupil that by legal definition that may be borrowed from the United Nation's 1951 convention, "A refugee is a person compelled to leave his country of nationality as he feels insecure and is afraid of persecution of his life, belief and opinions in his native land." Unfortunately, the United Nations did not proscribe the one who could compel others to leave to feel insecure or afraid. The United Nations did not seem to stand with the natives who had natural rights over their native lands, beliefs and opinions. There is no restriction on forced expulsion by the United Nations otherwise the term "refugee" itself would not have evolved.

Srikant in Aalokuthi emphasizes that he is not a refugee but a "*Bostuhara*". Sir, *Aaamra toh Bostuhara* (Sir, We are Bostuhara, not refugees). Clearly, "Refugee" for them is a term of abuse; a derogatory one for a person's situation and place in social hierarchy. Srikant insists that a person who is compelled to settle in West Bengal after his forced migration from East Bengal is not a refugee as since ages they have always moved from that space to this; boundaries being porous. Those who flaunted the sword of partition are responsible for this state of ours."

To quote Rushdie, "Amidst the dynamics of a rapidly changing world where identities are no longer sacred or secure but are constantly distorted and simultaneously reconstructed, it is really interesting to see the peculiar ways how various resistant identities seem to have emerged, seeking to redraw maps of reality by networking solidarities across nations, religions, genders, classes and cultures. If chaos is the law of nature, order has all along been the dream of man: "controlling" and "reordering" human experiences are part of man's "dreaming self" that give some kind of meaning to the evasive nature of reality." (Rushdie, P.12)

The fear of losing identity is evident from the words of 'Gouranga Haldar' of *Blood Island* who says, "Our people got married, had children and lived the remaining days of their lives dreaming of a lost home. But, somewhere, in the midst of 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." (P. 57) Transplantation in a new place is accompanied by the certainty that the old place has not yet released its hold. Change and the acquisition of new cultures is often a violent act. Mana Goldar, in *Blood Island* would hear "the refugees talk about the rain-fed, lush-green 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." (p.122). The same language, culture, no cultural difference narrative was appropriated by



the Left parties quite powerfully before they came to power in West- Bengal. Mana, the survivor remembers what Jyoti Basu had told them when he visited Mana Camp as the leader of opposition in West Bengal Assembly. ‘This is sometime in the mid-seventies, just before the Left came to power in West Bengal. “*Tomra banglar manush, amra banlay tomader basati debo*”(You are the people of Bengal, we will give you homes in Bengal). So when the Left Front came to power in 1977, with Basu as Chief Minister they moved on the Sundarbans. They had the hope and faith that air, water and the alluvial soil would make them miss home in East Pakistan a little less. These people then discovered Marichpani and fathomed the belief that the place could sustain them but all their hopes shattered before the crude and coercive measures of eviction adopted by the ruling Left Front government. According to the survivor’s account, in May 1979 the police force, allegedly accompanied by left cadres, arrived at Marichjhapi to evict the refugees. Thousands of huts were set on fire, women were raped, skulls of children were brutally crushed and people were shot indiscriminately; 5,000 to 10,000 people were allegedly killed, but to hide this, dead bodies were either dumped in deep forests or dropped into the river. It is widely believed by the Sunderbans inhabitants that these corpses became food for the famous royal Bengal tigers, turning them into man-eaters, as they developed a taste for human flesh.

The survivor narrative shifts between intense personal, corporeal suffering and that of community as a whole. Anne Cubilie has argued that “truth” in atrocity testimony exists in the interplay between terrifying physical experiences the survivors relate and the things they had seen. “*Khub Kosto* (A lot of pain).” Mana’s tears flow freely when asked about her life in the camp. She recalls, “When people tried to venture out, they were attacked by the river police with tear gas and bullets. Women were raped. Refugees only had changas (sharpened sticks) as weapons, their eyes burning due to the gas. I was only little, and I would see and hear of these battles between grossly unequal sides. Santosh Sarkar, my neighbour, was shot in the leg. He lost that leg.”(P.130). The suffering described is not simply inscribed upon the individual’s body but proceeds from a systematic condition and affects the social body of a community- Dalits and Women. During his conversation with Deep Halder, Manoranjan Byapari says,” Where were these people when the police broke the bones of my father’s chest in Marichjhapi with a rifle’s butt? My father was no leader of men; he was an honest man in search of an honest life who



could never recover from chest problems.” (P.159). Halder says that it is voice like Byapari’s that help stories of massacres like Marichjhapi stay alive in public memory. There is Sukhoranjan Sengupta, the septuagenarian journalist whom the author met and convinced to talk about Marichjhapi. He makes a shocking confession, “Your news reports come back to haunt you. Old bylines become nightmares; photographs you took ages ago stay on as ugly scars. On the night of 16<sup>th</sup> May 1979, I got a tip-off that the Marichjhapi Island would be freed of refugees. A few hundred lorries and trucks had been stationed at Hasnabad jetty. And there was a large police presence to keep out curious onlookers and truth seekers like me.” (P.70). Later, he gives an account of Suryakant Mandal whose sixty-year old mother got severe burn injuries as their huts were set on fire. Gouranga Halder relating the atrocities sadly reveals, “Non-stop police action had demoralized 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. There were several incidents of our boats being hit by police lunches and sunk mid-river. (P. 65).

These atrocity narratives reveal the deep fissures and faultlines in the Indian body politic. Even when they document individual suffering, they reflect a social and historical trauma. We have to assume that the atrocity memoir we read stands for several silences, of those who did not speak but suffered. Testimony’s truth, argues Cubilie, is an interplay of consciousness, memory and community, of their physical experiences, the sights they saw and the actions they had taken as part of a larger group. The narrator is a metonym who stands for an entire community, caste and class. (Nayar, P. 39).

The crisis in the history of humanity that began with partition and forced exile did not get over even after so many years. It remained existent due to the unjust attempts made to distort the facts, hide death-toll, murders, inhumane treatment and the silence of media, literature and academics over the Marichjhapi carnage. The crises persists with the truth that vernacular newspapers were muzzled by threats to withdraw government advertisements, a major source of revenue, so the vernacular press buckled under the pressure. As Niranjana Halder, the veteran newsman and one of the most prolific writers on Marichjhapi speaks to the author, “A report by renowned Gandhian social activist Pannalal Dasgupta created a stir. He was asked to accompany the refugees who had been forcefully evicted from Marichjhapi back to Dandkaranya. He wrote

that when kids died during travel, their bodies were just thrown off trains with no compunction for the bereaved mothers. This report came out in the paper Jugantar. Pramod Dasgupta, a top Left leader, threatened to cancel all advertisements in the newspaper if they continued to publish Pannalal Dasgupta's report on Marichjhapi; all reportage stopped. I got sidelined myself. Apart from Te Statesman, no one published any article on Marichjhapi anymore. When national publications tried to delve into the issue, their owners were approached by the West Bengal government officials who asked them not to publish anything, saying all this was a conspiracy against the Left in West Bengal. (P.96). Crises gets blatant when the apathy and blindness of the mainstream media is also routine.

Crisis gets sharpened when the left-leaning media and academia drew a caste-angle out of the state Govt's apathy and got engrossed in proving the element of caste bias of the upper-caste dominated left front; while the political play revolved around the creation of refugees in solid vote blocs which did not happen. The refugees did not seek any assistance, just the right to settle in Marichjhapi. They were self-sufficient and had built their own township where they had constructed roads, drainage, school, dispensary, market etc. As Byapari records, "But this is not what the Communist government wanted. Their deal was: We will give you rice, you join our rallies and vote for us." If these people became independent, capable, which they were turning out to be, they wouldn't depend on the government for food and clothes. The very idea of communists- a friend 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." (P.161)

This revelation is bitter, scathing and shattering as it brings forth the ultimate interest of the state government to remain in power through all means. Had religion or caste mattered for the communist party then CPI(M) would not have built up a powerful Muslim lobby in various pockets of West Bengal, especially in the Barishat-Hasnabad region where Muslims, for historical and economic reasons, were not favourably disposed towards the Hindu refugees of Marichjhapi as explained by Sukhoranjan Sengupta in *Blood Island*. To quote this journalist, "I had cordial relations with Fajlur Rehman. I asked him if Jyoti Basu was trying to make him speak against the Hindu refugees because he himself was a Muslim. On hearing my question, Rehman held me in a tight hug and said, "I have forgotten that day. And you had seen my house

burn as a reporter. I was not there. It is true that Jyoti Basu was trying to make me speak up against the Hindu refugees in Marichjhapi, but I advised him instead to visit Dandkaranya with the Prime Minister and see for himself the plight of the refugees.”(P.86) This proves that the dependence of economically vulnerable groups like small manufacturers, street hawkers, auto-rickshaw drivers and marginal farmers on government patronage for their livelihood was used by the left as a political resource to turn them into solid vote blocs. The Namashudra refugees suffered as they had denied this patronage and thus they were of no political use. Niranjana Halder when approached by the author retorts, “Mere tarao” (drive them away by force). That’s how the government regarded the homeless. See, there were refugees settled elsewhere, too, in West Bengal. Jadavpur in South Kolkata is a refugee resettlement colony. But these people were CPI (M) supporters; they were part of the Left’s voter base, and hence the government had no trouble with them.” (P.95).

The Crisis is slated when it is found out that the government on the pretext of saving the environment barricaded the settlers of that island and evicted them. In the words of Sukhoranjan Sengupta, “My fears came true. There was a law to protect forests, and the West Bengal government imposed that law on Marichjhapi. So, on 26 January 1979, an order was passed that no one could take food items, drinkable water and medicines to the island. A hundred-odd police launches and boats surrounded Marichjhapi. Thus began government action on the island, which would culminate into the forceful clearing of the entire place in May 1979, the death of many and the burning of Phonibala’s breasts. I have witnessed many horrors in my reporting life but all these years later, when I close my eyes at night, I still see her scars and the horror in her dying eyes.” (P.87). Gauranga Halder while speaking to the author recalls, “Our dream home was a mud filled island filled with shrubs. 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!”(P.59).

Vijay Gaur’s fictional interpretation of the Marichjhapi situation is marked by his attempt to observe and understand the characters who are caught in the turmoil of partition, in the double perspective between the ancient traditions and the baffling prospects of a new life. His characters try to change and find that the more they try, the more they remain the same. Memories of the

trials and tribulations of the first generation immigrants of her family is a subtle one in the case of Bani. Though he has tangled the story in the caste-strain and Hindu-Muslim syncretism; it is disappointing to find it failing miserably. The friendship between Hindu and Muslim friends could not survive after the Muslim League's call for Direct Action Day. In Deewan Patha, the author Vijay Gaur has sketched the character of Gopal Patha and his role in the Partition Riots of Bengal. Written in the backdrop of the aftermaths of partition, *Aalokuthi* is probably the first book in Hindi literature that has brought to surface the grim realities of human crisis in history. Literature, without having to be entirely fact-based or exclusively fictional, offers more nuanced insight into the times of crises.

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