



## MARGINALISED HISTORY TAKING REFUGE IN FICTION A STUDY OF AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE HUNGRY TIDE*

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### ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* successfully captures the agony of the dispossessed and marginalized people. The novel gives vivid picture of the suffering of dalit refugees in the islands of Sundarban is an archipelago which offers home for a number of endangered and threatened species. Due to partition of India and later the independence of Bangladesh large number of people were displaced. They had to leave their own territory and turned into refugees. Unlike upper caste refugees, who were able to get support to settle down, the low caste Dalit refugees had to struggle hard. Large number of refugees from East Bengal, tried to establish habitats in ecologically sensitive Sundarbans fighting against the devouring tides and dangerous predators. The refugee settlers struggled hard to make a niche in Sundarbans which is otherwise a hostile environment. Later the refugee settlers of Morichjhapi Island had to undergo severe assault under the name of ecoconservation. But this painful event of history is not recorded appropriately as this is the history of marginalized people. Ghosh takes this part of history as source for *The Hungry Tide* thus giving shelter to this marginalized history in his fiction. This paper also focuses on how the fear of revival of the forgotten namashudra movement, became one of the hidden factors that led to the forcible eviction of dalit refugees.

Keywords: Refugee, Marginalized, Namasudra, Dispossessed, Ecoconservation.

### INTRODUCTION

"Each slow turn of the world carries such disinherited ones to whom neither the past nor the future belongs".

It is no wonder that how advanced the world may be, there are still a number of human beings, who struggle a lot for their survival; These are the human beings, who are pushed to the margins for the reasons unknown to them, these are the human beings, who are denied a secured place in the world for the mistakes which are not committed by them. These are marginalized people and just like them, their history too is marginalized. Being neglected by

the mainstream history, this marginalized history, sometimes has to transform itself and settle in fiction in order to come into light.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* giving its way to full length discussions on various globally concerned concepts is definitely a thoughtful attempt of providing a space that can capture that panic universal cry of dispossessed people, which, many a times, fails to secure any place in the mainstream recording of history.

### DISCUSSION

The novel, *The Hungry Tide*, though on the surface level ostensibly poses the state of Nash-

equilibrium between Human survival and Eco conservation, is in a way, an attempt of reconstructing the history through fiction, by trying to bring on to the surface, one of the submerged events of history, which has its roots, as Annu Jalais remarks, in the intricacies of caste, class and communal differences. The account of surreptitious assault on the Dalit refugees in the novel and its historical reference supports the need to microscope the novel through Dalit lense.

Every major historical event manifests itself with consequences that are, most of the times, bifold in nature, with its positive outcomes on the visible layer and afflictive ramifications underneath. Partition of India is no exception to this, resulting into creation of two countries on one hand, deaths and displacement of millions of people on the other. Due to the partition on communal lines in 1947 huge number of East Bengali Hindus had to migrate to West Bengal. During this period large number of upper class Hindus migrated to West Bengal. Later in 1972, due to Independence of Bangladesh, there was a migration of large number of Hindus again, but this time most of the people migrated were low-caste Hindus. Hence, the first wave of migration consisted large number of upper-caste Hindus and the second wave of migration consisted of large number of low-caste Hindus. When the upper-caste Hindus migrated, it was easy for them to get support and shelter. They were able to find a safe haven in the homes of their affluent friends and relatives. But that was not case with the low-caste refugees. Unable to find any shelter and support, these Dalit refugees squatted on public and private land.

Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* takes this part of the history as its source and tactfully presents the repercussions of the partition of Bengal, its consequent refugee problem and how the low caste Dalit refugees were persecuted under the name of conservation of Environment.

Amitav Ghosh presents us Sundarbans which is also known as the tide country, with its complex topography and endangered flora and fauna. This UNESCO world heritage site which comprises the delta region of Padma, Meghna and Brahmaputra river basins, is a unique forest, with its stubborn coastal mangroves. Sundarbans is home to

numerous threatened and endangered species of animals, birds and reptiles. A part of Sundarbans is a Reserve area for the famous Royal Bengal Tigers and its brackish water serves as home for the endangered Orcaella too. Such an ecologically rich yet sensitive area is under heavy toll, as it offers shelter to not only these animals but also a number of dispossessed human beings and their families. These are the people, who have nowhere to go; people, whose destinies are shaped by dominant contemporary social, economical and political forces.

The tide country - Sundarbans of *The Hungry Tide* is a habitation for large number of Dalit refugees, who were forced to move away from their own territory of East Bengal due to partition and aftermath of independence of Bangladesh. It was not difficult for upper-caste settlers like Nirmal, who was supported and able to make name, fame and life for himself. It is no wonder that in this caste, class presumed society, these poor low-caste refugees are no more seen as human beings, who deserve a decent life, but they are just economic liabilities, that can be get ridden off by dumping somewhere. They were initially sent to Dandakaranya where they had to share scanty available resources with the natives there, which led to hostility. However, unable to bear the resettlement colonies, which were more like, concentration camps and longing for their once homeland, they decided to return to the tide country. Hoping that there wouldn't be any opposition from the Government, they congregated at railway stations to move towards Sundarbans. But the government acted against their hopes and denied them food, water and tried to stop them. Even though many refugees managed to escape to various places inside Bengal and some of them sailed to Morichjhpai.

The refugee settlers of Sundarbans developed a perfect harmony with the islanders. They succeeded in establishing a habitat in an otherwise hostile environment. Going through similar experiences of marginalization brought the islanders and refugees into solidarity and bounded them together for "a common cause, which is to fight for a niche for themselves".

Within a few months of their arrival at the Sundarbans, these refugee settlers built huts, cultivated land, dug tubewells and established fishing industry, salt pans, dispensaries, schools. Nirmal records this development in his diary as:

“There had been many additions, many improvements. Salt pans had been created, tubewells had been planted, water had been dammed for the rearing of fish, a bakery had started up, boat builders had setup workshops, a pottery had been founded as well as an ironsmith’s shop...

..... All this in the space of few months! It was an astonishing spectacle as though an entire Civilization had sprouted suddenly in the mud”. (Ghosh, P. 191)

This entire establishment, though an innocuous attempt in nature, filling the gap between development and under-development, caring and neglecting, is many a times considered as ramifications of subnationalistic attitudes. Subnationalism, being double edged in nature, may serve in either positive or negative way. As Prerna Singh argues in her “Subnationalism and Social Development: A Comparative Analysis of Indian States” about subnationalism as a progressive social policy that improves developmental outcomes and the solidarity that emerges from a sense of shared identity influences the quality of life of an individual. As long as it is not secessionist or aimed at othering sections, subnationalism can be seen as a constitutive element of Democracy. But more than the positive outcomes of subnationalism, its concomitant imperils are taken into consideration and due to this, most of the times it confronts an inexorable obliteration and that’s what happened in Marichjhapi. The solidarity that developed in Marichjhapi, raised the threats and brought on to the surface, the forgotten history of Namasudra movement and paved its own way for the inevitable suppression.

“It was universally agreed that the significance of Marichjhapi extended far beyond the island itself. Was it possible, even that in Marichjhapi, had been planted the seeds of what might become if not a Dalit nation, then at least a

safe haven, a place of true freedom for the country’s most oppressed” (Ghosh, 2004, P. 191)

The possibility of the seeds that have been planted in Marichjhapi, to sprout into a Dalit nation - a place for country’s most oppressed people, without any exemption, is likely to be crumpled. The uprisal of the Namasudra movement of Bengal, which was not given its due account in history, as one of the most influential anti-caste movements and its subsequent oppression by designed political consequences serves as a best example for this. The Namasudra movement began in 1872, asserted Dalit identity and combined oppressed forces against elitist system of oppression. The movement set an example for mass movements against caste injustice during pre partition era. The movement gained its strength from the large number of Namasudras and Rajbhansis in colonial Bengal, who shared a close geographical proximity. The movement which was begun originally as an anti-caste movement in colonial Bengal, lost its cohesiveness due to partition and later took to many directions. “Immediately after the exit of the British in 1947, there was a sharp and steep slump in the Namasudra movement. The partition of India ruined many a people, but those harmed maximum were the Namasudra. Not only the people and the community were ruined but also their movement was completely destroyed” (Ram, 1982, 4). Afterwards the Namasudras became rootless people divided in two countries and the later political developments and consequent communal riots forced them to leave their territory turning them into refugees, thus displacement giving disciplinary support for the conviction of authentic marginality as suggested by Spivak. Ross Mallick in his essay “Refugee Resettlement in forest Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and the Marichjhapi Massacre”, give the account of forcible evacuation and assault, these refugee settlers of Marichjhapi undergone through. “At least several hundred men, women and children were said to have been killed in the operation and their bodies were dumped in the river. Photographs were published... the opposition members in the state Assembly staged a walkout in protest... The central government’s scheduled castes and Tribes

Commission, which was aware of the massacre, said in its annual report that there were no atrocities against untouchables in West Bengal, even though their Marichijhapi file contained newspaper clippings, petitions and a list with the names and ages of 236 men, women and children killed at Marichijhapi prior to the massacre, including some who were drowned when their boats were sunk". (Mallick).

This harsh reality and trauma that was undermined in history, comes alive to the reader's mind through the surreptitious assail on the Dalit refugee settlers of Marichijhapi in *The Hungry Tide*. Nirmal's dairy records the agony of the refugees and their sufferings both mental and physical. Though the refugee leaders in the novel try to gain support by inviting the press and intellectuals from Calcutta, by showing them what they achieved in such a short span of time, ends as a futile attempt. Their cynical approach is exposed in Khokon's words when he says "you can't make an omelet without breaking eggs". The universal cry of human kind hoping, to be heard, taken care of, answered with a little help, results into stubbornness when it is unheard and neglected. It is understood when the settlers in the raw boat shouts in unison "Amra Kara? Bastuhara. Who are we? We are dispossessed". In Nirmal's words:

"It seemed at the moment not to be a shout of defiance but rather a question being addressed to the very heavens, not just for themselves but on behalf of a bewildered humankind" (Ghosh. P.211)

Soon that cry of defiance turns into a stubborn one, as "Marichijhapi Chharhona" "we'll not leave Marichijhapi, do what you may". Similar attitude is displayed by Kusum, when she rejects the advice of Nirmal and Horen, to escape from Marichijhapi, though it is obvious that the settlers are going to face severe assault. The agony of a human being, when entangled in a helpless condition, paralysed mentally, realizing the harsh truth that their whole existence is just "nothing" to the world, is well captured in Kusum's words:

"the worst part was not the hunger or the thirst,. It was to sit here, helpless, and

listen.. that our lives, our existence was worth less than dirt or dust... who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them?... where do they live, these people, do they have children, do they have mothers, fathers? As I thought of these things it seemed to me that this whole world has become a place of animals, and our fault, our crime, was that we were just human beings, always have, from the water and soil. (Ghosh, P. 261,262)

Kusum's statement is a universal appeal which is more significant in present times, where, willingly or unwillingly the world has to encounter its echoes every now and then. As Kanai and Piya are transformed at the end of the novel, realizing the fact that the true horror is nothing but ignoring the suffering of human beings just because they are the poorest of the poor. This realization is essential for every human being.

#### CONCLUSION

Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* is a thoughtful attempt of reconstructing the history through fiction. He successfully captured the universal cry of agony that uttered by the helpless, dispossessed, which many a times fails to secure its due account in history and made it alive in the form of a direct appeal to the reader's mind thus giving shelter to that marginalized history in his fiction. Brinda Bose writes: "Ghosh's fiction takes upon itself the responsibility of reassessing the troubled antecedents, using history as a tool by which we can begin to make sense of or at least come to terms with our troubling present". When the lost humanity of the humankind resurfaces, painful history will neither repeat itself nor does it need to take refuge in fiction.

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