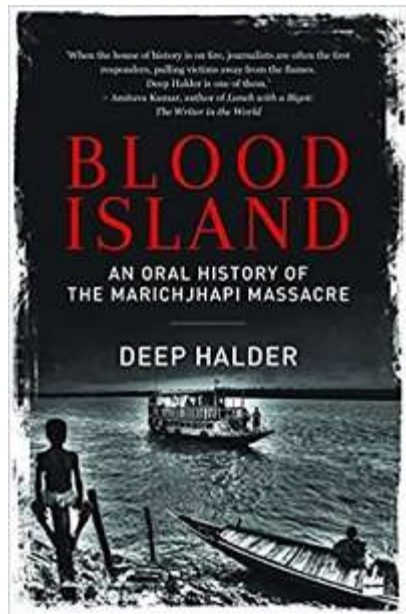


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## Book Review of Deep Halder's *Blood Island: An Oral History of the Marichjhapi Massacre* by Camellia Biswas

The book under review is an honest attempt to corroborate the goriness and tenebrosity of a long-harkened pogrom executed on the untouchable refugees from East Bengal which took place from January 1979 to May 1979 and is popularly known as the Marichjhapi Massacre. The author, Deep Halder's aims is to restore the 'lapse memory' by transcribing the narratives of the victims who had not only faced the atrocities meted out to them during the Marichjhapi massacre but had survived the post-massacre ordeals. It was more than just an episode, a dreadful journey from East Bengal to West Bengal, living at



different camps and finding a place like Marichjhapi which temporarily became their safe abode but later turned into a burning hell.

The Introduction of the book sets a tone of violence, sufferings and pain as it summarizes the ceaseless ordeals of the refugees. After the partition of India, West Bengal saw its first wave of migration inflow, comprising mostly the upper-class Hindu *Bhadralok*. In contrast, several lower caste Hindus decided to stay back in East Bengal as they were attached to their land (now Bangladesh) as farmers, fishers or artisans. They thought their class- solidarity and shared-livelihood would help them coexist peacefully with the Muslims. But soon, incongruity started to grow, and they were persecuted based on religion. This led to the second wave of migration into India during the 1960s-70s of the lower caste and class (like, *Namasudras*) who lacked the means to survive on their own.

In the Preface and Afterword, the author leverages on the ideals of a 'good journalist', by being responsive on revisiting the tragic stories of Marichjhapi, a state-managed violence led by the then Chief Minister of West Bengal, Jyoti Basu and exhume facts by digging out old inconvenient truths. This translated to the killing of thousands of refugees at point-blank range, raping of women, the merciless beheading of children; all of which was a discernment of violation of human rights, which can be compared with the recent political discourse of intolerance and lynching. The underlying theme that the

book addresses is how 'caste-bias' becomes a significant proponent of gaslighting the massacre. Scholars like Annu Jalais and Ross Mallick have observed this carnage from a caste perspective, camouflaged by the government's sternness on safeguarding ecology.

Jalais (2005) points out that most of the Marichjhapi settlers were from the lower caste and were given the 'shrift' from the Left Front government who claimed themselves to be "the government for the casteless and classless margins", but were, in reality, bound with upper-caste hegemony.

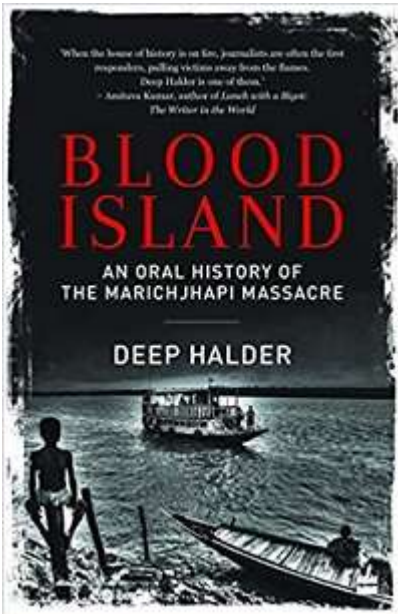
### **Oral History as a Writing Style**

The book is divided into nine chapters, encompassing anecdotes of nine individuals who directly or indirectly are related to Marichjhapi and had witnessed the massacre in varying degrees of atrocities. The author argues that Marichjhapi for many is a discarded and distorted record. Hence, the book attempts to retrieve it from the dustbin of history in the form of oral history, relying on memories over text, entwined with emotions and shaped out of entombed agony.

The setting of several chapters is monotonous, for every participant talks about the similar sufferings and tragedies faced; however, it is the monotonicity that catches the reader's attention. Through the deliberate 'repetitiveness', the author tries to authenticate the memories and stories with similar nostalgia of pain and

sufferings. The book can be sub- categorized as an oral biography to democratize the history of the Marichjhapi massacre and refugee rebuttal history by incorporating vantage points of those often excluded or marginalized from the historical canon (women and minority group); in this case, the Hindu lower caste Bengalis, Dalits or *chotoloks* (Dunaway, 1991).

The chapters demonstrate Halder's interest in the personal



narratives of the victims and understanding the combination of the communal and personal mode and how with time, the narrator proceeds into his/her personal space, giving details of every account. It relatively provides a valid articulation of individuals and their collective experience with the socio-cultural and political world of a lower caste refugee in Bengal (Errante, 2000).

In the book, the interlocutors talk about their life struggles on Marichjhapi and the long-lost identity of a refugee in the context of their own experiences. Hence, we can say that the book goes beyond just being an 'Oral History', and fits into the literary format of oral memoirs. Here, the narrators' own words become

the foundation of the text, enriched with references of experience and events related to the Marichjhapi Massacre.

The detailed description of the narratives both in terms of personal and collective form, makes them build 'narratives of Identity' (Anderson, 1991), where the interlocutors are trying to communicate how they perceive themselves and how the world should see them, i.e. beyond the image of a vulnerable refugee, and *chotoloks* (the classless and the casteless) who dared to be self-sustaining, reliant and not dependent on the Bengali *Bhadralok*. As Manarajan Baypari (Chapter 9) says, "*they couldn't tolerate the fact that we could dare to dream without bending before him.*"

*Marichjhapi settlers had declared that they had no need of any government assistance. They were self-sufficient and had built their own township" (p.187).*

The Marichjhapi Massacre and the chronic refugee crisis is nothing but a case of human-made disaster where marginalized people are the sufferers. The interlocutors want the world to know that a crime has been committed. It gives a purpose for them to warn the reader and the perpetrators of the massacre "Never Again" to help others avoid such fate. Despite Halder's claim of using references and academic scholarship while compiling the book, there is little archival evidence that he provides to in explaining the hows and whys of the refugee crisis leading to Marichjhapi Massacre. *Kanti Ganguly*, (Chapter 8), Minister of Sundarbans Affairs in the then Jyoti Basu government, cross-questions Halder for not referring to 'authorized'

archival account like government documents and press releases by the then Bengal government, instead relying upon local remembrance.

The book exhibits a multivocal discourse, where time, space and memory have an interlink amongst each other resulting in a narrative that “exudes a free-flow with dialogues and questions from the interviewer to the narrator instead of a simple monologue” (Portelli, 1992). However, one of the setbacks of turning time into space ‘in memory’ as seen in **Blood Island**, is that the interlocutors’ traverses back and forth and often cannot maintain a chronological sequence and thus, some chapters evidence fragmented narratives where participants divert from one memory to another.

However, Halder should be acknowledged of trying his best to keep the authenticity in the orality of the participants. He wanted the victims to recognize their stories and narrate on their voices thus giving them the agency through oral history, instead of his own interpretation of the stories, and also restraining from translating certain Bengali expressions to English. For example, He retains the original Bengali Slang “*Suorer Baccha*” (p.188- 189), an expression of abhorrence for Jyoti Basu (Chapter 9).

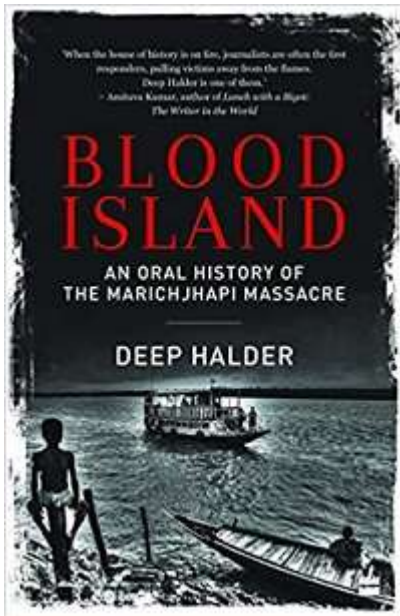
***Lacking the Understanding of Reserve Forest, the Marichjhapi Island*** The book does throw light on the events that outlines the Marichjhapi carnage for example; In January 1979, the West Bengal government prohibited all movement into and out of Marichjhapi under the Forest (Conservation) Act of 1927, imposing an economic blockade along with section 144 of the Criminal Penal Code, making it illegal for five or more persons to come together at any given time (Introduction). However, the author does not attempt to elucidate the readers on the claims made about Marichjhapi being a reserve forest and the related conservation politics.

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The book refutes the whole exclusive vs inclusive conservation approach in the incident which could have tied the state-sponsored violence and conservation politics together.

The official reason to forcibly evict the refugee settlers from Marichjhapi was that it is a protected island / Reserve forest. The refugees were prosecuted for destroying the ecology by encroaching the reserve forest and cutting trees, both for selling timber and setting up human



habitation, which the state claims to have a severe consequence on the Sundarbans' fragile ecosystem. The Protected Area Management for wildlife has always seen the poor, forest-dependent as the trespasser and hence imposed control over wilderness towards protecting dwindling environmental resources by forceful evictions (Robbins, 2004) especially when the Sundarbans in 1970s was on

the world uproar for the massive sponsorship it received by the WWF to protect the tigers and the mangrove ecosystem which further doubled the reasons to evict the refugees from the island.

Although the narratives bring out the violation of human rights in the name of 'environmental degradation', often associated with the marginalization of poor subsistence communities, the author, however, fails to corroborate the politics of 'conservation and management'. The management of environmental resources and landscape has always been in the hands of the rich and elite who try to impose political geography over ecological geography to suppress the dispossessed, restricting their access to subsistence and making them vulnerable to epochal disasters and die-offs. The book frames an underlying remark that even if the refugees had trespassed in a Reserve forest and were said to have felled *Goran trees* (a mangrove species) which is illegal, a valid reason for the government to evict the refugees forcefully should not have happened in the form of carnage. This indirectly questions the 'comprehensiveness' of the Indian Forest Act, but the author does not cite any forest law/act related pieces of evidence or narratives to which the readers might want to apprehend in conclusion.

Overall, Halder's book offers several insights that are revealed through the unexpected flux of tragedies of the refugee crisis as it interfaced with the rising change in the political scenario of West Bengal in the 1970. The book subtly questions the state's arbitrary power to regulate aspects of refugee lives by enmeshing on their tragedies. However, it fails to challenge the oft-cited dichotomy between *Bhodrolok* and *Chotoloks*, in which the marginals, that is the lower caste Bengalis is forced to live and



operate in the scheme of illegality, injustice and tragic history.

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Title: Blood Island: An Oral History of the Marichjhapi Massacre

Author: Deep Halder

Publisher: Harper Collins Publishers India

Available: [Amazon](#)

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## About the Author

### Deep Halder

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Deep Halder has been a journalist for seventeen years turned Author, writing on issues of development at the intersection of religion, caste and politics. Currently, he is an executive editor at India Today Group Digital

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## About the Reviewer

### Camellia Biswas

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This Book is reviewed by Camellia Biswas. She is a doctoral student at the department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Gandhinagar. Her doctoral thesis is on Human-Nature Interactions in Sundarbans.

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