The history of the Indian novel in English reflects the fact that Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 has been the single most important determining factor of India’s destiny. From Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* in 1956 to Shauna Singh Baldwin’s *What the Body Remembers* in 1999, it seems a new perspective on the event emerges in each succeeding decade.

Marked by the twin features of massacre and migration, Partition, however, did not mean the same thing for Punjab and Bengal. As outlined below, there are three significant differences which have had a direct bearing on the refugee movement in these two states:

Firstly, the Punjab Partition was a one-time event that was marked by a two-way exodus, while the Partition of Bengal turned out to be a continuing process, with migration happening predominantly in one direction – i.e. from East to West Bengal. In other words, there was a more or less equal exchange of population on the western border in 1947 which was not the case in West Bengal.

Secondly, compared to the nature of border and boundary in the West where political, strategic and military considerations converted the entire Punjab region into two rigid divisions, the dividing line in the East remained porous and flexible, facilitating the refugee movement.

The third and most important difference between the Punjab and Bengal Partition was the attitude of the centre to the crisis on the two borders at the time it happened. The crisis in Punjab was seen as a national emergency, to be tackled almost on a war footing; and as the communal violence in the West came close to being genocidal, the government felt a moral responsibility to put into immediate effect rehabilitation measures for the refugees. This sense of urgency was totally lacking on the Eastern border. The violence there was not of the same magnitude as the violence in the West. Hindu minorities in East Bengal were not considered to be in grave danger, and the flight of refugees westwards was regarded mostly as the product of imaginary fears and baseless rumours. In fact, well after it had begun, Nehru continued to believe that the exodus in the East could be halted, even reversed, provided government in Dacca could be persuaded to deploy ‘psychological measures’ to restore confidence among the Hindu minorities. This difference in attitude and perception of the Central government regarding the nature of the crisis facing the two borders translated itself strikingly into the expenditure on refugees in the West and the East. A difference that would have permanent, debilitating, economic consequences for the state of West Bengal, and the way it dealt with its refugees.

Amitav Ghosh highlights precisely this aspect in his second novel, *The Shadow Lines* (1988). He provides vivid glimpses of what life was like for refugees on both sides of the border, even at the end of the Nehruvian era. And if we are to go by the testimony of the narrative of this novel, the Bengali Muslim refugees who sought shelter in Bangladesh seemed to have fared much better than the refugees in West Bengal, who were dammed to a life of destitution and starvation in the nation they had escaped into.

But the problem of Bengali Hindu refugees was not confined geographically to one state alone. While a substantial percentage of the refugees who had crossed the Eastern border lived in West Bengal – mostly in Kolkata and its suburbs – many were also sent to other states.

The government of West Bengal was of the opinion that the refugees (who by the 1960s constituted a third of the population of the state) were a burden to be shared jointly among the federal government and those of the neighbouring states. It was in this context that the Dandakaranya project in central India was conceived as a long-term solution to the problem of rehabilitation of Bengali refugees.

Its genesis lay in the Rehabilitation Ministers’ Conference of 1956 where it was decided that government relief would be given only to those refugees who agreed to resettle outside West Bengal. Subsequently, the Dandakaranya Development...
Actually, the government falling short of the expectations of the refugees – not being able to meet their needs or not being sympathetic to their problems – was not a new story in West Bengal. But what happened in 1979, the way they were forcibly evicted from the island, was a gross betrayal by the Left.

As Prafulla Chakrabarti demonstrates in his classic, The Margin Men: The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal (1990), the turning point came with the refugee movement and Left Politics in West Bengal in the early years of Independence. In fact, the political ascendency of the Left government was, to a large extent, the result of the refugees and their struggles for rehabilitation in the 1950s.

Chakrabarti argues that the Communists provided the refugees with leadership in their struggle for rehabilitation, and in return, the refugees became the striking arm of the Communists, providing them with the mass support which enabled them to entrench themselves in the city of Calcutta, and later, catapulted them to power. But in 1979, in a most ironic and tragic turn of events, the Left Front Government in West Bengal was turning against the very cause which it had championed for over two decades and which had been key in bringing it to power.

The refugees at Morichjhapi showed initiative and organisation in their attempt to build a new life. To borrow a phrase from Niranjan Chatterjee’s well-known essay on East Bengal refugees, theirs was ‘a lesson in survival.’

And they put to rest, once and for all, the false stereotyping that had gained currency in official discourse against the so-called ‘non-enterprising, lazy, parochial’ East Bengal refugees (contrasted with their solid, hard-working, self-respecting West Bengal counterparts).

The Hungry Tide’s protagonist Nirmal writes of the refugee initiatives in his diary:

‘Spoonfuls had been created, tubewell had been planted, water had been dammed for the rearing of fish, a bakery had started up, boot-makers had set up workshops, a pottery had been founded as well as an innsmith’s shop; there were people making boats while others were fashioning nets and roughshod; little marketplaces, where all kinds of goods were being sold, had sprung up. All this in the space of a few months! It was an astonishing spectacle! As though even the entire civilization had sprouted suddenly in the mud’ (p.192).

But even while the Morichjhapi refugees gave shape to their dream, their feet were firmly planted on the ground. They tried, as far as possible, to be self-reliant, but at the same time they were conscious of the need to gain social and political support for their cause. And to the refugees held a feast, and invited dignitaries to the island to see their enterprises first hand. On the face of it, proved to be a great success. It is interesting that the group actively sought the support of the establishment. But they were cheated. In the novel, Ghosh shows that the big shots who came from Calcutta, despite their lofty speeches, actually already knew that these settlers would eventually be evicted.

But the settlers at Morichjhapi, trebly displaced as they were, proved to be a defiant lot. Till their last breath, they fought the Government. In that last phase of their struggle, when they were being forcibly evicted by a 1,500-strong police-force (who were specifically deployed for the purpose), their battle-cry became...

‘Aamir korsi! Bazubani! Morichjhapi chhodhona!‘ ‘We are not going! We will not leave Morichjhapi, do you what?’

Hearing this, Nirmal remarks in the novel:

‘Standing on the deck of the bhojbati, I was struck by the beauty of this. When else you could belong, except in the place you refused to leave’ (p.254).

The refugee’s case was also unique in another respect – in that it was intimately linked up with an environmental issue. For the rehabilitation debate, in their case, basically boiled down to the question: what is more important – conserving forests for animals or allowing humans to live?’

In The Hungry Tide, Ghosh uses the testimony of a Morichjhapi settler and victim, Kusum – as told to Nirmal during the final phase of the islander’s clash with the police – to articulate the peculiar predicament of the Morichjhapi refugees:

‘The worst part... was to see, helpless, with hunger growing at our bellies and listen to the paulomays... ‘This island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals... it is a part of a reserve forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers...’

Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them?’ (pp.262-63)

While I have sought to demonstrate the distinctiveness of the Morichjhapi setting and in particular the peculiarity of that other refugee who sought shelter in West Bengal, their trajectory covers all the important phases of refugee influx into West Bengal (until 1979) and the accompanying problems of rehabilitation. In fact, with their experience, they trace the curve of West Bengal politics (vis-à-vis refugee rehabilitation) from 1947-79.

In his earlier novels, Ghosh dealt with some of the major phases of refugee influx into West Bengal and their immediate and far-reaching consequences. The Morichjhapi incident can be traced back to all of these phases: starting with the original refugees from Bangladesh (1947), who were resettled first in West Bengal, and later, moved to Dandakaranya (in 1961), from where they escaped and came to the Sunderbans (1979) only to become the victims of state-sponsored violence a year later (1979).

The un-preparedness and inadequacy of the state government to deal with the deluge from the east, their subsequent plan to rehabilitate the refugees from East Pakistan elsewhere in the country, the monumental failure of that plan in Dandakaranya, the final effort of the refugees to rehabilitate themselves in the Sunderbans, and the unexpected reappearance from the new Left Front Government –all of this can be traced through their experiences.

The Morichjhapi massacre is but one aspect of a wonderfully rich and complex text. But one significant fact that it reflects the wider experiences of Hindu refugees in the subcontinent. And through it, following on from what he started in The Shadow Lines (though in a much more direct way), Ghosh draws our attention to the aftermath of partition on the Bengal border.