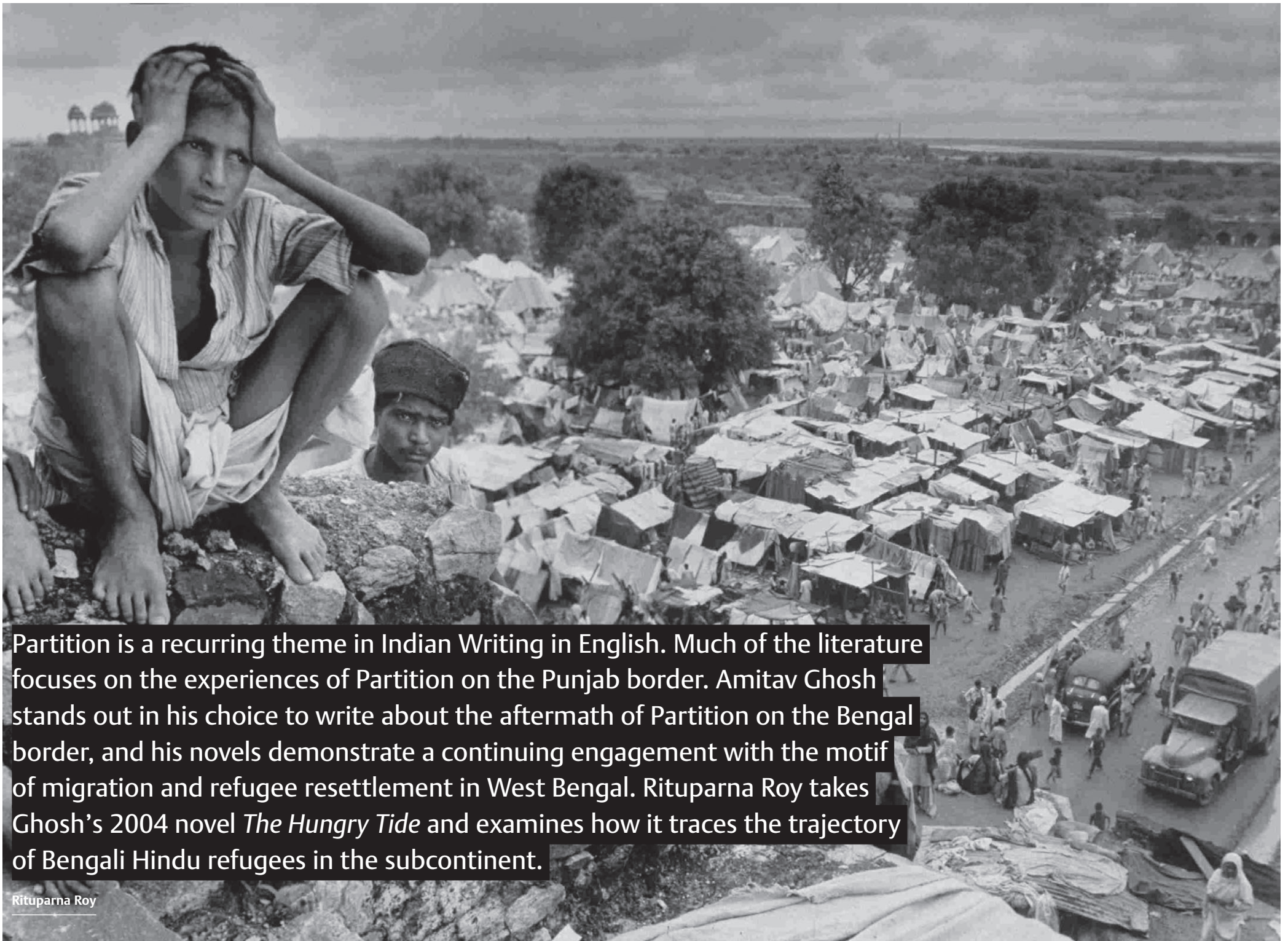


The hungry tide

Bengali Hindu refugees in the Subcontinent



Partition is a recurring theme in Indian Writing in English. Much of the literature focuses on the experiences of Partition on the Punjab border. Amitav Ghosh stands out in his choice to write about the aftermath of Partition on the Bengal border, and his novels demonstrate a continuing engagement with the motif of migration and refugee resettlement in West Bengal. Rituparna Roy takes Ghosh's 2004 novel *The Hungry Tide* and examines how it traces the trajectory of Bengali Hindu refugees in the subcontinent.

Rituparna Roy

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 1956¹ to Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers* in 1999,² 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 genocide, 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.³

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.⁴ A difference that would have permanent, debilitating, economic consequences for the state of West Bengal,⁵ and the way it dealt with its refugees.

Amitav Ghosh highlights precisely this aspect in his second novel, *The Shadow Lines* (1988).⁶ 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 damned 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

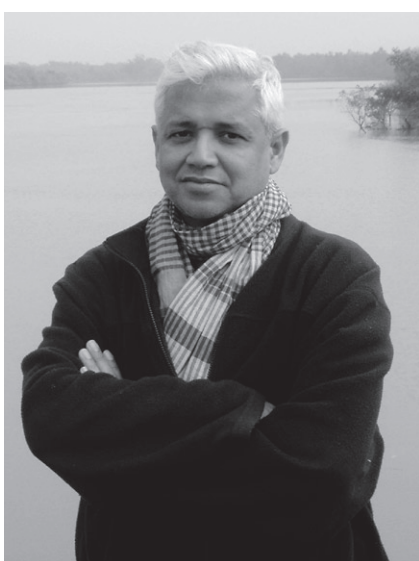


Fig. 1 (above)
Photograph
by Margaret
Bourke-White.

Fig. 2 (left)
Amitav Ghosh.

Authority (DDA) was established in 1958. DDA was responsible for developing an area of 78,000 square miles, known as Dandakaranya, in the Koraput and Kalahandi districts of Orissa, and the Bastar district of Madhya Pradesh.

In *The Hungry Tide* (2004),⁷ Amitav Ghosh chronicles the saga of just such a group of refugees who were sent by the West Bengal Government to Dandakaranya in Madhya Pradesh in 1961, but who left the place and returned to West Bengal in 1978, only to be massacred and evicted again.

Recovering lost histories

Ghosh's writing has never had a strict demarcation between 'fiction' and 'non-fiction'. He has always combined several roles – that of novelist, journalist, scholar and historian, and one of his fundamental preoccupations as a writer has been to recover lost histories. *The Hungry Tide* attests to this, with the novel intertwining accounts of the Morichjhapi Massacre of 1979 in the Sunderbans and the history of riverine dolphins (*Orcaella brevirostris*) which are an integral part of the island's history and ecology. The discussion in this article will be confined to the massacre in the Sunderbans.

Ghosh dramatises the last phase of the refugees struggle in the Sunderbans. But life had been difficult long before – ever since their forced migration to India. They had moved to West Bengal after partition, hoping for a better life there. That hope proved utopic as they were later, in the 60s, pushed further inland from their deltaic origins into central India. Dandakaranya was conceived as a long-lasting solution to their problem. But ironically enough, it increasingly turned out to be 'a land of banishment rather than the haven of hope it had been made out to be by rehabilitation administrators.'⁸

The refugees felt alienated and between 1965 and 1978 more than 12,000 families deserted the settlement. In mid-1978, there was a new wave of desertions under the leadership of an organisation called the *Udavastu Unnayansheel Samiti*. The press at the time talked of a 'migration in reverse gear.' The West Bengal government managed to send a lot of these refugees back, but about 25,000 managed to return to West Bengal and build a settlement on the island of Marichjhanpi.

The West Bengal government was averse to the idea of old refugees returning back to the state and deeply unhappy with this development. It wanted a solution, once and for all, to the vexed refugee problem that the state had been facing for more than three decades. It declared the Morichjhapi settlement an illegal encroachment by 'deserters' on forest land in an area earmarked for the protection of endangered tigers. The refugees were given an ultimatum to evacuate the island by 31st March, 1979; when that proved futile, the government started an 'economic blockade' that severely affected the refugees; and the state police finally cracked down in mid-May 1979. Official estimates claimed that only 36 refugees were killed in this action, the actual number, however, ran into several hundreds.

In the *Hungry Tide*, the Morichjhapi Massacre is traced through a witness, Nirmal, and his diary to his nephew (Kanai). In Chapter 19 of the novel, we come to know the facts of the incident from Nirmal's widow. Nilima runs a hospital and a trust in Lushibari and is known as 'Mashima' (or aunt) to all. She tells her nephew Kanai of the events leading up to the massacre and of her husband's involvement in it.

'...In this place where there had been no inhabitants before there were now thousands, almost overnight. Within a matter of weeks they had cleared the mangroves, built badhs and put up huts. It happened so quickly that in the beginning no one even knew who these people were. But in time it came to be learnt that they were refugees, originally from Bangladesh. Some had come to India after Partition, while others had trickled over later. In Bangladesh they had been among the poorest of rural people, oppressed and exploited both by Muslim communalists and by Hindus of the upper castes' (p.118).

Ghosh eloquently summarises the events at Morichjhapi in 1979 through Nilima's narrative. His fictional representation of the event keeps very close to what actually happened, and he has successfully shown the various ways in which Morichjhapi was markedly different from other refugee settlements. The refugees there were trebly displaced people – they had moved from East Pakistan to West Bengal, from West Bengal to Madhya Pradesh and then again from Madhya Pradesh to the Sunderbans. Yet in Morichjhapi they had found a place where they were no longer at the mercy of the local people or even the government, initially. They found vast tracts of free land in the Sunderbans and created a world of their own. However, the refugees coming to the tide country was premised on a false assumption – they chose this place because they thought that the new Left Government in West Bengal would sympathise with their cause.

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 Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal* (1990),⁹ there was a symbiotic relationship between the refugee movement and Left Politics in West Bengal in the early years of Independence. In fact, the political ascendancy of the left in West Bengal owes a great deal to 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.

'Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them?'



The refugees at Morichjhapi showed initiative and organisation in their attempt to build a new life. To borrow a phrase from Nilanjana Chatterjee's well-known essay on East Bengali refugees, theirs was 'a lesson in survival.'¹⁰

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 Bengali refugees (contrasted with their solid, hard-working, self-respecting West Punjabi counterparts).

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

'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 set up workshops, a pottery had been founded as well as an ironsmith's shop; there were people making boats while others were fashioning nets and crablines; 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 an 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 garner social and political support for their work. To this end the refugees held a feast, and invited dignitaries to the island to see their enterprises first hand. On the face of it, 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 injustice of the government. And in the very last phase of their struggle, when they were being forcibly evicted by a 1500-strong police-force (who were specifically deployed for the purpose), their battle-cry became:

'Amra kara? Bastuhara. Morichjhapi chharbona'
'Who are we? We are the dispossessed. We'll not leave Morichjhapi, do what you may.'

Hearing this, Nirmal remarks in the novel:

'Standing on the deck of the bhotbhoti, I was struck by the beauty of this. Where else could you belong, except in the place you refused to leave' (p.254).

The refugees' 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?¹¹

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 sit here, helpless, with hunger gnawing at our bellies and listen to the policemen say...

'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 distinctness of the Morichjhapi settlers and their experience from that of the other refugees who sought shelter in West Bengal, their trajectory covers all the important phases of refugee influx into West Bengal (until 1979) and the accompanied problems of rehabilitation. In fact, with their experience, they trace the curve of West Bengal politics (*vis-a-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 long-term consequences for the state. In a way, all of them come together in *The Hungry Tide*. For, the history of 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 (1947-late '50s), then moved to Dandakaranya (in 1961), from where they escaped and came to the Sunderbans (1978) 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 plans 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 reprisal 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 it is very significant in that it reflects the wider experiences of Bengali 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.

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Notes

1. Singh, Khushwant. 1956. (1988) *Train to Pakistan*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal.
2. Baldwin, Shauna Singh. 1999. *What the Body Remembers*. Canada: Vintage.
3. See 'Introduction' to Bagchi, Jasodhara & Subhoranjan Dasgupta (eds.) 2003. *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*. Kolkata: Stree.
4. There is a detailed discussion of this much-neglected aspect of the administrative consequences of the Partition of 1947 in Joya Chatterjee's 'Right or Charity? The Debate over Relief and Rehabilitation in West Bengal, 1947-50' in *The Partitions of Memory: The Afterlife of the Division of India*, edited by Suvir Kaul. (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001).
5. Chatterjee explores this theme in great detail in her book, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967*. 2007. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
6. Ghosh, Amitav. 1988. *The Shadow Lines*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal.
7. Ghosh, Amitav. 2004. *The Hungry Tide*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal.
8. Kudaisya, Gyanesh. 2000. 'Divided landscapes, fragmented identities: East Bengal refugees and their rehabilitation in India, 1947-79', in Kudaisya, Gyanesh & Tai Yong Tan (eds.), *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia* (Routledge Studies in the Modern History of Asia), 156. London & New York: Routledge.
9. Chakraborty, Prafulla. 1990. *The Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal*. Kalyani: Lumière Books.
10. Chatterjee, Nilanjana. 1992. *Midnight's Unwanted Children: East Bengali Refugees and the Politics of Rehabilitation*. Brown University.
11. For a discussion of this aspect of the novel, see Mondal, Anshuman. 2007. *Amitav Ghosh*, 176-178. Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press.

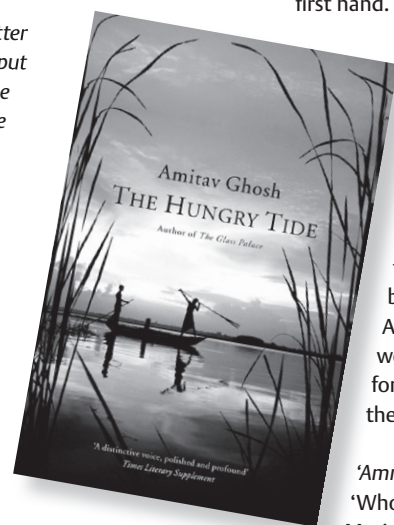


Fig. 3 (above right)
The Sunderbans.