

**Cyclone Aila and the Sundarbans: An Enquiry into the
Disaster and Politics of Aid and Relief**

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Cyclone Aila and the Sundarbans: An Enquiry into the Disaster and Politics of Aid and Relief

Amites Mukhopadhyay

Basanti Raptan, a resident of the southern part of Kusumpur¹ island in Gosaba Block of the Sundarbans, woke up to a morning that was different but not unusual in the Sundarbans. Since early morning, a thick cloud hung over the island and there was a strong wind blowing across the river. Basanti woke up early for her household chores little realising what the day had in store for her. She lived with her one and half year old daughter as her husband was away in Kolkata working as a construction labourer. While Basanti got up, her daughter was still asleep. As the day progressed the wind began to blow harder. Around eleven in the morning the wind suddenly changed into a violent storm. The mud wall and doors of her house started to tremble under its impact and Basanti could see from her courtyard that the storm made the coconut trees bend into halves. Suddenly she heard cries from her neighbours' houses. Before she could step out, a huge wave of water broke open the door and mud wall of her courtyard and pushed her into a corner. In complete bewilderment Basanti clutched on to the mud wall of her kitchen. Seeing the water rising menacingly she waded through waist deep water in a desperate bid to rescue her daughter who was sleeping. Before she could reach her room, a fresh wave of water broke down the mud walls of her room and swept the child away from her. Basanti's cry for help was lost in the deafening sound of wind and water.

I heard this incident during the course of interaction with the villagers at a tea shop in Kusumpur. The broken asbestos roof and deep cracks in its mud walls indicated that Aila's fury did not spare the shop as well. On May 25 this year a devastating cyclone, Aila, swept across South Bengal particularly the deltaic Sundarbans killing people, their livestock and rendering thousands homeless. Those living on the margins once again became marginalized. The very next day islanders were found lined up on the embankment pleading, shouting and jostling with each other trying to grab relief and aid that came their way. And many others having lost their land, houses, and also their family members already started to migrate out of the Sundarbans in search of an uncertain future in Kolkata. The saline water that broke through embankments, flooded the villages, destroyed mud houses and polluted rice fields.

Hamlets have been reduced to wasteland – with submerged crops, uprooted trees, shattered homesteads and emaciated [and dead] cattle all around. Ponds which have been only source of portable water lay contaminated and stinking. Not even stray dogs that survived the disaster would go near them (Chattopadhyay 2009:33).

The West Bengal State Government and many non-governmental organisations responded by providing aid and relief on a war footing. Food, clothes, tarpaulin sheets and medicines were distributed among people. However, relief and aid materials were short in supply to meet the

needs of the victims. And secondly, even when relief materials were available in plenty they never reached the people who needed them badly. In other words, the story of aid and relief could provide insight into how politics was played out at the local level. This is particularly significant because a few weeks before Aila, the results of the Parliament elections in West Bengal signaled the beginning of the end of left dominance in the state. With the Trinamool Congress (TMC) turning out to be a major contender of power, the narrative of governmental relief for the cyclone victims was also that of parties using resources to mobilize their respective support bases. In this paper I look into the governmentality of relief and aid in Aila stricken Sundarbans and its implications for local politics. In doing this, I restrict myself to the Sundarbans falling in the district of South 24 Parganas of West Bengal. Unraveling the career of relief and aid in the Aila struck Sundarbans also offers a way of understanding how rule is consolidated and power is exercised.

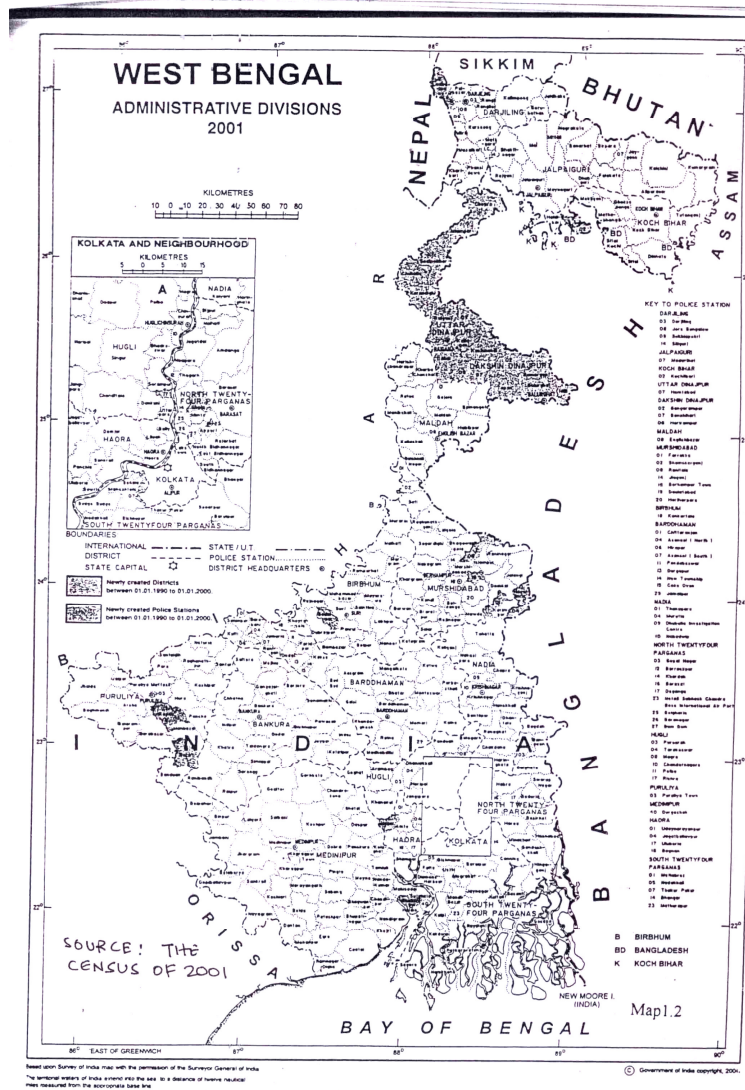
I begin by looking into the problem of marginal status of the Sundarbans islanders. Here marginality is induced by low priority being assigned to people's problems in the region. The construction of the Sundarbans as a heritage site or its possible inclusion as one of the seven wonders of the world suggests that people's needs in the delta appear secondary to those of wildlife. This discussion is important in that it provides the context in which one needs to understand how Aila marginalizes the *marginalized*. The next section provides a broader picture of aid and relief in the post Aila Sundarbans. Here I draw on regional and local newspapers as social texts to portray this picture, the picture that is replete with party rivalries, confrontations and local level negotiations over Aila relief. This broader picture then helps us present my specific case study i.e. politics of Aila relief in Kusumpur of Gosaba Block of the Sundarbans. Apart from the Government, many non-governmental organizations were actively involved in relief and aid among the victims. In narrating the story of relief and aid in Kusumpur, I also examine the role of a local NGO, because governmental power in a neo-liberal context is often exercised through a host of organizations and bodies that do not automatically fit under the rubric of "the state" (Gupta and Sharma 2006:277).

Marginality Revisited

While the Sundarbans islanders are still suffering the death and devastation of Aila – a substantial proportion of the population is still living in the makeshift tents on the embankments and struggling to make both ends meet. The Ministers of the Left-Front Government of West Bengal met in Jharkhali in Basanti Block of the Sundarbans to inaugurate and celebrate Wildlife Week on 21st October this year. The Forest Minister of the West Bengal Government informed the people of the region that collaboration and efforts are already underway to include the Sundarbans in the list of world's seven wonders (Times of India: 2009). The Sundarbans² forms the Southern part of the Gangetic delta between the rivers Hooghly in the west of West Bengal and Meghna in the east, now in Bangladesh. The swamps of the Sundarbans support one of the biggest tracts of estuarine forest in the world. The Sundarbans encompasses an area of over 25,500 square km, two-thirds of which lie in Bangladesh and one-third in India. The Indian part, with which I am concerned in this paper, is in the state of West Bengal (comprising of nineteen Blocks spread over the districts of North and South 24 Parganas (see Maps 1 and 2) and covers an area of 9,630 square km of which nearly half is forested. The reason why the region is famous today is because it is the largest natural habitat of Bengal tigers providing a home to nearly 271 of

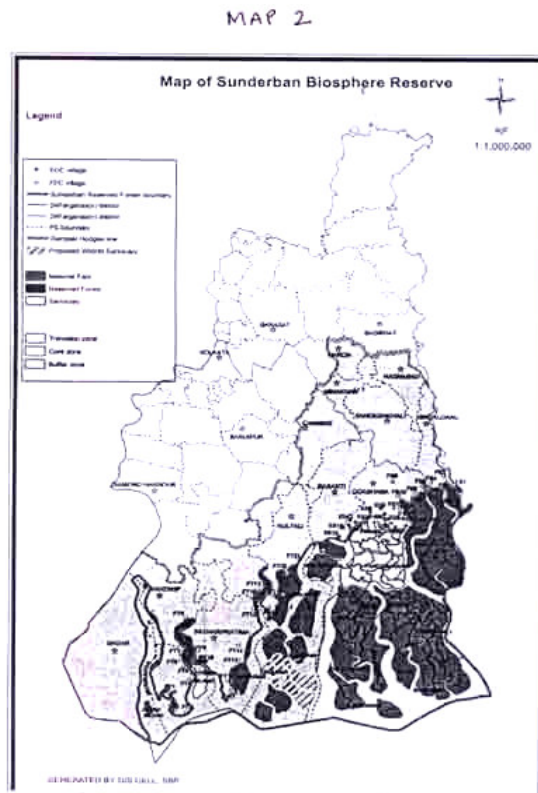
Map1

MAP 1



Source: The Census of 2001

Map 2



Source: Indian Sunderban: An Overview, Sunderban Biosphere Reserve, Wildlife Wing, Forest Department, Government of West Bengal, May 2004

them (Directorate of Forests 2004:34). In 1973 the Sundarbans forest was declared a tiger reserve. In 1984 the Sundarbans became a National Park. The year 1989 saw the Sundarbans emerge as a Biosphere Reserve in which large stretches of mangrove forest, containing sixty four mangrove species, the highest in a single area, had been conserved and wilderness maintained with its original ecosystem intact under the protective shelter of Project Tiger (Directorate of Forests u.d.:3). In the same year, the Sundarbans was declared a World Heritage Site for its unique ecological endowments. And now the governmental efforts and initiatives are on to put the delta on the list of world's seven wonders. The *wonderous* Sundarbans is known throughout the world for its ecological properties, Bengal tiger and valuable marine resources.

However, the fact less known is that this *wonderous* land is also an abode of about 3.7 million people (Census: 2001). Out of 102 islands in the Indian Sundarbans about 54 are inhabited and the rest are notified as reserved forest. People living on these islands are mostly migrants from other parts of West Bengal or Bangladesh. The islands lying further South (on the margins of the forest) and closer to the Bangladesh border have migrants mostly from Bangladesh, with immigrants still crossing the border and settling into the Sundarbans. These islands on the southern fringes are part of the active delta, being constantly configured and

reconfigured by tidal movements in the rivers. The areas further up and nearer to Kolkata are parts of the stable delta. In the stable delta or in areas, which are connected to the mainland of West Bengal, prevalent modes of transport are rickshaws, motor-driven three wheelers (often referred to as *autos*), buses and trains. However, the areas lying further south and surrounding the forests have mechanized boats (locally called *bhatbhati*) or non-motorized boats (dinghies) as the dominant mode of transport that connects otherwise isolated islands. Most of these islands have brick-paved roads which only allow cycle-vans (three-wheeled cycles with raised platform to carry goods and also people) to ply. These roads are few and vans ply as far as roads exist. Beyond roads are mud embankments or bunds, which serve as pathways connecting one part of an island to another.

People's life on the southernmost islands revolves around land, water and forest. Although agriculture remains a source of livelihood for the islanders, the brackishness of rivers makes agriculture unsuitable and uncertain. Winter cultivation is virtually non-existent for want of fresh water. Poor families especially those having very little or no land rely on rivers for marine resources such as fish, prawn or crab. Forest is an important source of livelihood for poor families. The families frequent forest in search of firewood, wood, honey, etc. People are engaged in livelihood activities that are physically demanding and challenging. The islands lying further south and on the margins of the forest are inhabited predominantly by people from Schedule Caste Communities. As mentioned earlier, these are the islands inhabited by migrants from Bangladesh. The Sundarbans also has a sizeable proportion of tribal population. According to 2001 Census, 42 per cent of the total population of the Sundarbans is from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribe communities as against 28.5 per cent for the whole of West Bengal (see Tables 1 and 2 for Block wise distribution of SC, ST and other population). Among the thirteen Sundarbans Blocks of the district of South 24 Parganas, Gosaba is one of the Southernmost Blocks, others being Basanti, Patharpratima, Kakdwip, Namkhana and Sagar. It is quite apparent from the people's livelihood options and the social composition of the population that people living in these Blocks of the Sundarbans remain socially and economically neglected.

Table 1 Block-wise Distribution of Population of the Sundarbans in the District of North 24 Parganas

Blocks	Population	Scheduled Castes	Scheduled Tribes	Others
Haroa	182,522	45,332	10,962	126,228
Minakhan	168,965	52,857	17,547	98,561
Sandeshkhali I	140,476	45,308	36,488	58,680
Sandeshkhali II	136,318	60,870	30,214	45,234
Hasnabad	177,521	45,043	6,012	126,466
Hingalganj	156,400	101,585	10,419	44,396
Total	962,202	350,995	111,642	499,565

Source: compiled from Census of India, Primary Census Abstract

Table 2 Block-wise Distribution of Population of the Sundarbans in the District of South 24 Parganas

Blocks	Population	Scheduled Castes	Scheduled Tribes	Others
Canning I	244,627	123,936	3,075	117,616
Canning II	195,967	48,173	11,654	136,140
Mathurapur I	164,650	60,904	589	103,157
Joynagar I	219,090	89,739	145	129,206
Joynagar II	209,145	76,761	974	131,410
Kultali	187,989	88,851	4,844	94,294
Basanti	278,592	107,602	17,462	153,528
Gosaba	222,822	143,221	20,560	59,041
Mathurapur II	198,281	58,728	3,308	136,245
Kakdwip	239,326	86,042	1,941	151,343
Sagar	185,644	51,588	691	133,365
Namkhana	160,627	41,797	710	118,120
Patharpratima	288,394	68,311	2,834	217,249
Total	2,795,154	1,045,653	68,787	1,680,714

Source: compiled from Census of India, Primary Census Abstract

Not only do people live physically on the margins, but they are marginalized because state's approach to the Sundarbans' development has a sense of injustice built into it (Mukhopadhyay 2009:121). People's needs in the Sundarbans are made to appear as if they are secondary to a grand protectionist imperative i.e. the conservation of the natural resources and the wildlife of the delta. The conservation drive is based upon an implicit assumption that the Sundarbans can grow as a natural habitat of non-humans like tigers, crocodiles, monkeys, deer etc. only if humans are kept at bay. In other words, the image of Sundarbans as a natural wilderness is based upon the recognition of tiger as the legitimate claimant to the land and people as only intruders or mere 'food' for the tiger (Jalais 2005). The image of the delta as a natural resource site—a *wonderland* that is essentially unsuitable for humans—had been deployed historically by the governmental rationality during colonial and postcolonial eras. The Marichjhanpi incident³, when the East Bengali refugees were denied settlement in the Sundarbans on the grounds that the place belonged to the tiger—is only a link in the chain of events that led to the consolidation of the Sundarbans' image as wildlife sanctuary.

In a land marked by uncertainty of agriculture and absence of industries, people's livelihood needs are pressing and options are limited. But even the pursuit of these limited livelihood options is viewed as detrimental to the conservation of the wildlife of the delta. People's visit to the forest is believed to destroy the forest resources and endanger tigers. The Sundarbans Biosphere Reserve was launched to strike a proper balance between the human and non-human inhabitants of what is considered a unique eco-system, but this balance is tilted in favour of the tiger. When people entering the forest or creeks get killed by tigers, it is justified

through recourse to the argument that the people have been 'intruders'. However, when a tiger strays into inhabited islands, killing humans and livestock, it is believed the animal is hungry. Their fishing in the river is viewed as depleting marine resources and catching of tiger prawn seeds as being responsible for bio-diversity loss and the erosion of mangrove cover. The Forest Department of the Government of West Bengal in its reports defines catching of tiger prawns as a threat to the Sundarbans' ecosystem (Directorate of Forests n.d.:4; Directorate of Forests 2004:15). The very presence of humans on the islands is a threat to the future conservation of the forested delta. According to a report in the *Hindustan Times*, 5 December 2002, a recent volume entitled *Wilderness: Earth's Last Wild Places*, published by a team of over 200 international scientists, has identified the Sundarbans as one among thirty-seven of earth's most pristine areas critical to earth's survival and where over-exploitation of resources and human settlement are seen to be posing a threat to the place (Hindustan Times 2002). In the words of Herring, the central dilemma in the Sundarbans development is that, unlike the tribal forests elsewhere in South Asia, where the conflict is between the utilization of an existing habitat cum common property resource and a historically novel statist claims to management, the shrinking mangrove forests have become an object of conflict between social forces seeking a livelihood and a state that seeks to limit that process (Herring 1987:9).

Despite this overarching image of the region as a natural wilderness and the islanders having marginal status there are government departments meant to do development for the people in the region. Two such departments are, Sundarban Development Board (as part of Sundarbans Affairs Department, SDB and SAD) and Irrigation and Waterways (Irrigation). Sundarban Development Board was constituted in 1973 to cater to people's special needs and to undertake comprehensive development of the deltaic region. However, the Board thrived almost incognito and remained simply an adjunct of the Department of Development and Planning. It took the Board almost twenty-three years to publish its first development report in 1994. And it was only after the Directorate became part of the Department of Sundarbans Affairs (SAD) in 1994 that the report was published. In the preface to one of its administrative reports R. P. Samaddar, former Member Secretary to the Board, described SDB as a 'distinct development agency' (Samaddar 2000) catering to the needs of the deltaic region. Yet the early history of the Board shows that no sooner was the Directorate (Board) formed, than it lost its credibility and initiative as a distinct development agency.

In the preface to the third report in 1998, Mira Pande, Secretary to the Sundarbans Affairs Department defined SDB as the result of special efforts on the part of the state Government to bring about an "appreciable and consistent improvement in the conditions of the region along with the *normal development activities* which are being carried out by different Government Departments in the region" (Pande, 1998; italics added). Ever since the Board was formed, it mainly coordinated the development activities of other government departments. The functioning of Board did not change after it became part of the Sundarban Affairs Department. The Board's function is mainly confined to providing infrastructure facilities like a) construction of brick-paved roads, culverts, jetties and bridges, sinking of tube-wells, etc., b) social forestry and tree planting, c) setting up of small brackish water fish ponds and d) agricultural extension programme (mainly *rabi* and *kharif* seed distribution to small and marginal farmers). However, in each of the above-mentioned domains the Board is merely duplicating the efforts and services offered by other government departments such as Public Works Department (PWD), Public Health and Engineering [(PHE) for infrastructure], the Forest Department (for social forestry and

plantation), the Department of Fisheries (for brackish water fish and prawn cultivation) and the Department of Agriculture (for agriculture extension programme).

The Board and SAD's agricultural extension programme, which consists largely in providing *rabi* and *kharif* seeds to farmers and popularizing cotton and mushroom cultivation among the farming households, remains far from being a success. The question of sustainable agriculture is deeply connected to the landscape and ecology of the delta. With people continuing to lose lands and being forced to live on the edge of embankments, agriculture remains of marginal significance. The Board (now a fully-fledged department) committed to addressing people's problems in the region, has not adopted any comprehensive policy or strategy to counter the pressing problem of river bank erosion, flooding and people displacement. What is even more surprising is that the department which works closely with government departments on various other fronts (agriculture, public works, social forestry, etc.), does not collaborate at all with the Irrigation Department to formulate policies on an issue as endemic and crucial as embankment erosion and displacement.

The 3,500 long embankment (the life line of the people) protecting 54 inhabited islands in the Indian Sundarbans comes under the purview of the Irrigation Department. These embankments were built to protect these islands from daily inundations during high tides. While people live in perpetual anxiety and uncertainty of embankment collapse, a view has gained currency in the Government Departments, such as Irrigation and Sundarban Affairs that the Sundarbans embankments are unsustainable largely because people originally settled in a place primarily meant for wildlife and, more importantly, did so before the land was sufficiently elevated by the natural process of silt deposits (Mondal 1997:6; Kanjilal 2000). If people took time to settle, the land could have been sufficiently elevated and not have needed protective embankments around their islands. It sounds as though people in the present day Sundarbans might as well be prepared to pay for the mistake the early settlers committed. Although the Irrigation Department does anti-erosion work in the Sundarbans, in the department's discourses of development some kinds of erosion are seen as more menacing than others. In the Departmental budget proposals presented to the Legislative Assembly concerns have been expressed over the growing Ganga-Padma⁴ erosion in Malda and Murshidabad⁵. The Minister heading the department considers this problem menacing because it not only engulfs thickly populated villages and results in the loss of fertile agricultural land, but also endangers national property like railway tracks, National Highways, the Feeder Canal at Farakka Barrage and many places of archaeological, historical and religious importance (Irrigation and Waterways 1989, 1990 and 1994). However, the same department remains silent over the problem of erosion in the Sundarbans. Even after the disastrous cyclone of 1988 the department only mentioned the damage the cyclone caused to the department's property, but did not bother to mention the lives that were lost in the cyclone. Since erosion here affects only the property of local people, not the 'real treasure' of the nation—the royal tiger, which lies hidden in the forests—it does not assume national importance.

However, to say this, is not to suggest that *bunds* are not protected in the Sundarbans. The department's actual practice of embankment building and repair further explains the vulnerability of the islanders. After the Aila's devastation, in a local newspaper circulated in the Sundarbans called *Badweep Barta* the Left-front government was blamed for not maintaining the height of the Sundarbans embankments (*Badweep Barta*: 2009). The newspaper stated:

The Left-Front⁶ Government is in power for thirty two years. Why did the Government fail in strengthening the embankments and increasing their heights? What did the Irrigation Department of the West Bengal Government do in taking care of the embankments in thirty two years? After the Aila, the Left Government of West Bengal has planned to spend Rupees 10 thousand crores in building and constructing the Sundarbans embankments. However, this hardly boosts the morale and the poverty and Aila stricken islanders. In 2006 Rupees 85 lakhs was spent rebuilding 500 meters of embankment in Basanti, the embankment collapsed in fifteen days (*Badweep Barta*: 2009; Author's translation).

The above news report hinted at corruption surrounding the process of building and rebuilding of embankments. Embankment collapse and the subsequent flooding of islands can turn a villager into a pauper overnight as happened during the Aila. However, the story does not end here. People remain marooned for days and months (depending on the remoteness of the island) until the Irrigation Department intervenes. What follows is further acquisition of land in the name of building protective embankments that result in further displacement of people. When a considerable stretch of embankment collapses, the obvious solution lies in building a ring embankment, which is normally built behind the old one that has collapsed. While the Sundarbans' embankments may be ecologically unsustainable, the possibility of a ring embankment provides the engineers and contractors with an opportunity to make money. Since land acquisition is necessary for building new embankment, decisions about how much of the land would be acquired or how far behind the existing embankment the new one would be built are left entirely to the discretion of the engineers. They justify such acquisition on the pretext that it is they who are better able to judge what is 'good' for the people. With the help of contractors, the engineers acquire land for the purposes of building such ring embankments. Rarely, people are compensated against their lost lands.

Thus, the story of embankment protection in the Sundarbans is one of continuous land acquisition without any comprehensive policy of relocation or compensation ever offered to people. Here marginality is not simply induced by low priority being assigned to people's problems, but also by the way their problems are addressed. The Aila is not first of its kind, cyclones had struck the region in the past. It is important to know how people live between the cyclones being completely at the mercy of the governmental machinery. Disasters and calamities should not be viewed simply as fundamental interruptions to social and political life, but as variant manifestations of pre-existing processes and power relations (de Waal 2006).

Narrative of Aid and Politics of Relief Distribution

In South 24 Parganas, the Sundarbans Blocks that were badly hit by Aila were Gosaba, Basanti, Sagar, Namkhana, Patharpratima, Kakdwip. The total length of embankments severely damaged in these Blocks was 621.95 kilometers (Irrigation and Waterways Departments: n.d.). Out of 308 sluice gates, about 125 were completely damaged resulting in saline ingress and flooding of the islands (Ibid). The total area in South 24 Parganas inundated with saline water was 105,075 hectares (Department of Agriculture of South 24 Parganas: n.d.). Individual ponds and rice fields were salinated. The devastation of Aila put the Government on red alert. As part of its short-term relief the government distributed food, clothes, water and medicines among the Aila victims (see Table 3). Local Sub-divisional, Block Development Offices and Panchayat bodies were mobilized for immediate relief activities. Government initiatives were supplemented by local, regional and even international NGOs. Some of the international, regional and local NGOs who

TABLE 3 . BLOCK WISE STATUS REPORT OF RELIEF DISTRIBUTION

Sub-Division : Canning, South 24 Parganas

Sub-Division	Block	Total Tarpaune	Total Special GR (Rice/MT)	Total Chira(Qtl)	Total Gur(Qtl)	Total Cash GR	Total Pulse	Total Dhuc	Total Saree	Total Lungi	Total Children Garments	Total Lime	Total Water	Total Baby Food (Qtl)	Total LPG Cylinder	Total LPG Oven	Blankets	Kerosin Oil	Mustard Oil (Lt)	Soyabin Chinks (Kg)	Candle Sticks (pcs)	Match Box (pcs)	Potato (Quintal)	Bleaching Powder	ORS	Chlorine
Canning	Gosaba	48824	10481	2397	124	0	856	18044	21899	16200	44200	3735	0	822	370	73	0	0	12	100	200	0	12	456	15676	10
Canning	Canning-I	1400	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	10	0	0
Canning	Canning-II	1530	45	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Canning	Basanti	21320	335	841	13	0	188	7828	7945	6700	19400	0	0	5	0	0	80	4000	100	50	200	200	5	0	0	0
TOTAL		73074	10861	3238	137	0	1044	25872	29844	22900	63600	3735	0	827	370	73	80	4060	112	150	400	200	17	466	15676	10

SOURCE : SUBDIVISIONAL OFFICE IN CANNING

were found to be actively involved in aid and relief among the victims were Southern Health Improvement Society (SHIS), *Vigyan Mancha*, Mass Education, Tagore Society for Rural Dvelopment (TSRD), Nimpith Ramakrishna Ashram, Bharat Seva Ashram Sangha, *Sabuj Sangha*, *Kultali Milan Tirtha* Society etc. Long-term relief and development work went in three main directions: embankment repair and rebuilding, desalinization of ponds and reconstruction of houses for the homeless. While embankment repair and issues concerning reconstruction of houses were entrusted to the Irrigation Department, local Panchayat bodies and Block Development Offices, desalinizing individual ponds was entrusted to NGOs working in different blocks of the delta.

Buddhadeb Bhattacharyya, the Left Chief Minister of West Bengal saw in Aila an opportunity to salvage the left parties' lost mass base in the Sundarbans region⁷. The minister lost no time in undertaking a whirlwind tour of the Aila devastated Blocks of the Sundarbans thinking that his presence would make difference to his parties' electoral fortune in future. People of Gosaba Block were equally sarcastic when I asked them about the Chief Minister's visit. What they said can be summed up in the following manner, 'The first time he was seen in the countryside when he was sworn in as the Chief Minister. All these years he was in hibernation and this was the second time that he was seen amidst the poor and emaciated. Aila has made us feel important'. Having been successful in winning all the major left strongholds in the Sundarbans, Mamata Banerjee, the Trinamool Congress leader and currently the Railways Minister of the Congress coalition Government at the Centre wanted to strike her party's roots further into the Sundarbans soil. She was active in arranging for relief for the victims and also wanted to convey the image of the Left-Front Government as being incapable of responding to the needs of the poor and vulnerable. To this end, she even requested the Central Government not

to send the Aila relief fund through the State Government and instead channelize the fund through the South 24 Parganas District Panchayat body (i.e. Zilla Parishad⁸) where her party was in power.

At this point it is interesting to see how the Left-Trinamool rivalry articulated through governmental aid and relief for the Aila victims. To show how Aila became a site for the pursuit of partisan interests, I focus on regional and local newspaper reports. Ever since Aila struck the Sundarbans, the Calcutta based newspapers such as *The Telegraph*, *The Times of India* and *Anandabazar Patrika* have been publishing reports on Aila and politics of aid and relief. The *Telegraph* dated 7th July 2009 carried a report which stated:

[The central Finance Minister] Pranab Mukherjee today proposed to allocate Rs 1000 crore for Aila relief to the Bengal Government as sought by Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, a move likely to please the state's left regime more than ally Mamata Banerjee...Bhattacharjee had requested the Prime Minister to release Rs 1000 crore from the national calamity and contingency fund for reconstruction and relief in areas hit by the cyclone on May 25. But Mamata and her party [Trinamool Congress] demanded that central funds be disbursed directly to panchayat officials bypassing the state government. The Trinamool chief had said that any money provided to the CPM-led state government would only reach party supporters (*The Telegraph*: 2009).

The very next day *The Telegraph* published another report highlighting Left-Trinamool rivalry over Aila aid:

The centre has sanctioned Rs 478 crore from its national calamity fund for Aila relief over and above the money [Rs 1000 crore] promised in yesterday's budget. State Finance Minister Asim Dasgupta said [that] Rs 1000 crore allocation...was meant for construction of concrete embankments and the money sanctioned today for immediate repair and rebuilding jobs... Mamata Banerjee had pleaded with the centre not to channel the aid through the state government. She wanted the money to go directly to the panchayats – "PM to DM" – many of which are in Trinamool Congress control now (*The Telegraph*: 2009a).

A news report published in *The Times of India* dated 30th October 2009 gave a further twist to partisan interests crystallized over Aila aid:

Trinamool Congress zilla parishad sabhadhipatis of South 24 Parganas and East Midnapore skipped the meeting with the Chief Minister on Wednesday,...They wanted to "prove" that the Rs 100 crore allocated by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh from PM's National Relief Funds for Aila victims was due to Mamata Banerjee's initiative. Trinamool Congress leader Sobhan Chatterjee displayed a letter written by the PM to Mamata Banerjee about funds for cyclone shelters. He accused CPM of playing politics with rural development... (*The Times of India*: 2009a).

As we turn our attention away from regional newspapers to local newspapers published from the Sundarbans we see a different scenario, one replete with party rivalries amidst which it is the victims who suffer. *Badweep Barta* dated 1-30th June 2009 provided an account of people's condition in the Aila struck Sundarbans and stated that because of partisan and vested interests, governmental relief has not reached the victims living in the remote parts of the Sundarbans islands. Relief and money are being channeled through local government offices or Panchayat bodies, but effectively it is the party leaders [of Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPI-M), Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) or TMC who control people's access to aid and relief. In sheer desperation people are leaving the Sundarbans in search of food and shelter elsewhere (*Badweep Barta*: 2009a)

The newspaper further stated:

The newly elected SUCI [an ally of Trinamool Congresses in recent parliamentary election] MP [Member of Parliament] Tarun Mondal who was a doctor himself was not allowed by the local

leaders of the ruling left to organize a medical clinic in Jharkahli of Basanti Block. The local leaders of SUCI, Trinamool Congress organized a joint demonstration before Basanti police station to protest against the ruling left atrocities. However, the ruling left leaders of Basanti denied any such allegation by the opposition (*Badweep Barta* 2009a; Author's translation).

Badweep Barta in its news report dated 16-31st August 2009 further highlighted politics over pond desalinization. It stated:

People of Masjidbati Mouja⁹ in Basanti are devastated by Aila. The local Trinamool leadership has accused [the RSP] Panchayat of playing dirty politics over Aila relief. As a result people who are really in trouble have not got any relief. Local Trinamool leader Mannan Sheikh alleged that the money that came for desalinizing the ponds has been improperly used to desalinate only 40-50 ponds. It is further alleged that a list of beneficiaries has been prepared for governmental compensation. As per rule the enlisted people are required to open bank accounts. The Panchayat has made the Aila victims pay Rs 100 each for opening a bank account. Without this money compensation will not reach the victims (*Badweep Barta*: 2009b; Author's translation).

Even though Trinamool Congress and its ally SUCI had been successful in winning Parliamentary constituencies (Joynagar and Mathurapur) of the Sundarbans, Gosaba and Basanti still remain Left (particularly RSP) strongholds (see Tables 4,5,6 and 7 for the relative strength of the left parties and TMC). The Assembly constituency wise breakdown of Parliamentary constituency of Joynagar shows dominance of RSP in Basanti and Canning East and close contest between the left and TMC supported SUCI in Gosaba. At the Panchayat level, the Zilla Parishad is in TMC's control (see Note 8), but the Block and Village Panchayat scenario in Basanti and Gosaba explains why there is intense power tussle between the RSP and TMC. The local level conflicts and rivalries over Aila relief can be seen as expressions of Trinamool Congress making inroads into the left bastions. This gets reflected in a local newspaper *Aranyadoot* which stated that Trinamool Congress is gradually increasing its strength in Basanti Block. About 400 CPI-M and RSP cadres have joined the Trinamool Congress in this Block. This floor crossing is clearly a slow but steady process (*Aranyadoot*: 2009). Similar processes were at work in Gosaba Block also where many RSP and CPI-M cadres were known to have joined the Trinamool Congress. This has contributed to the strengthening of the Trinamool Congress' position in Village Panchayats of Amtali and Radhanagar-Taranagar in Gosaba Block (*Ibid*). It is perhaps needless to say that this floor crossing has intensified party rivalries and confrontations over Aila relief.

Table 4 South 24 Parganas' Joynagar (Reserved) Parliamentary Constituency (Assembly Wise Break Down of the Election Results in the Sundarbans)

Name of the Assembly Constituency	Nimai Barman RSP Candidate	Tarun Mondal TMC supported SUCI Candidate
Gosaba (Reserved)	60,908 votes	64,403 votes
Basanti (Reserved)	64,434 votes	46,397 votes
Kultali (Reserved)	64,993 votes	70,116 votes
Joynagar (Reserved)	36,114 votes	73,043 votes
Canning West (Reserved)	45,600 votes	73,861 votes
Canning East	71,358 votes	50,114 votes
Mograhat East (Reserved)	49,040 votes	68,239 votes
Total votes	392,447 votes	446,173 votes
Postal Ballot	48 votes	27 votes
Total votes polled	392,495 votes	446,200 votes

Source: *Aranyadoot* 1-14 August 2009a

Table 5 South 24 Parganas' Mathurapur (Reserved) Parliamentary Constituency (Assembly Wise Break Down of the Election Results in the Sundarbans)

Name of the Assembly Constituency	Animesh Naskar CPI-M Candidate	C.M. Jatua TMC Candidate
Patharpratima	71,611 votes	87,305 votes
Kakdwip	63,570 votes	78,089 votes
Sagar	76,951 votes	88,862 votes
Kulpi	51,458 votes	71,272 votes
Raidighi	69,401 votes	88,439 votes
Mandirbazar (Reserved)	55,064 votes	81,685 votes
Mograhat West	47,133 votes	69,421 votes
Total votes	435,188 votes	565,073 votes
Postal Ballot	354 votes	432 votes
Total votes polled	435,542 votes	565,505 votes

Source: *Aranyadoot* 1-14 August 2009a

Table 6 Electoral Strength of Parties at the Village Panchayats in Gosaba and Basanti Blocks

Block	No of Village Panchayat	CPI-M	RSP	TMC	Congress
Basanti	13	3	9	1	-
Gosaba	14	2	6	6	-

Source: Gosaba and Basanti Block Panchayat offices

Table 7 Electoral Strength of Parties at the Block Level Panchayat (Panchayat Samity)

Block	No. of Members	CPI-M	RSP	TMC	Congress
Basanti	38	10	24	3	1
Gosaba	37	6	21	10	-

Source: Gosaba and Basanti Block Panchayat offices

Aila, Kusumpur and Politics of Relief

The newspaper reports documented above gives us an idea about the situation of post Aila aid and relief. The above discussion serves as the background against which I provide an account of Aila and politics of aid as it unfolds in Kusumpur island. Here I restrict my discussion to three main aspects of post Aila aid and relief, namely embankment building, desalinization of ponds and reconstruction of houses for the homeless.

While addressing the members of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly on 16th June 2009 the RSP minister heading the Irrigation Department of the Left-Front Government reflected on the cyclone Aila and its devastating impact on the Sundarbans:

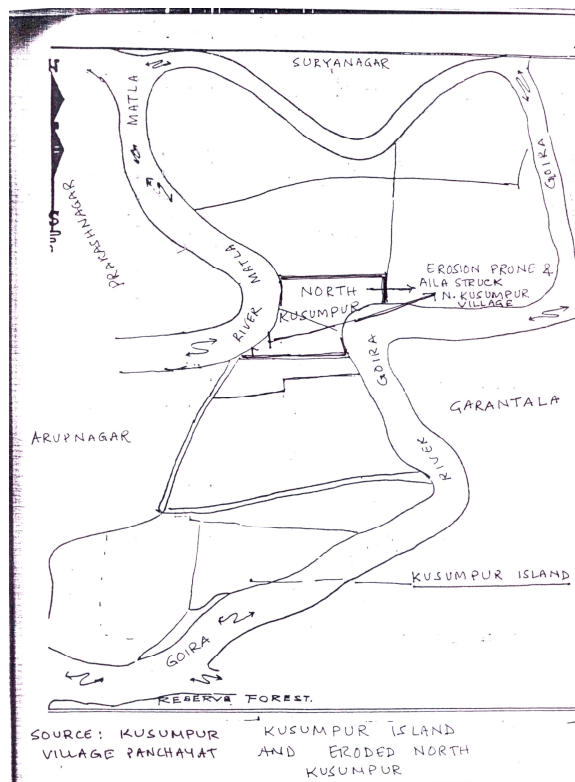
I want to draw attention of the honourable members of the House to cyclone Aila that struck the Sundarbans... The cyclonic depression in the Bay of Bengal caused the water body to rise to unprecedented heights, destroying the mud embankments and resulting in flooding of the inhabited islands... The retired chief engineer of my department who was also the secretary of Irrigation department is holding talks with the representatives of the World Bank to find a solution to the problem... Meanwhile my department has started repairing embankments in many places to prevent further saline ingress during high tides. However, land acquisition at times poses as a major obstacle to the process of embankment construction and repair (Naskar 2009, Author's translation).

Minister's last few words are significant. Land acquisition is central to the Irrigation's scheme of things. Nowhere was this strategy more cruelly manifest than in the northern part of Kusumpur island where the rivers Matla and Goira are eroding the banks on both western and eastern sides respectively (see Map 3). In the first section, I discussed how land acquisition works to the advantage of the Irrigation engineers and contractors and thereby reduces people to mere objects of governmental power. The pre-Aila northern part of Kusumpur island was already erosion-prone. Families living in this narrow stretch had survived four successive ring embankments. According to these families, the land they lost had surfaced and added to the land mass of the island across the river. However, they were denied access to that land because it had become the property of the Government. According to the villagers, each time a protective ring embankment was constructed, the land acquired was more than necessary. The villagers proved powerless in the face of the gigantic machinery of the Governmental Department with its elaborate blueprint for land acquisition. The ring embankments constructed encroached upon people's lands, ponds and even houses. No compensation came their way even though the Kusumpur Panchayat (under RSP's control) gave them to understand that they would be compensated and relocated elsewhere. Before Aila the maximum land available between the rivers on both sides was 800 feet. Aila had further narrowed the width of this land. About 130 families living in this narrow stretch of land were almost on the verge of being displaced. They lost confidence in the local RSP leadership which they found completely apathetic to their cause. These villagers once even boycotted the Panchayat election to protest against Governmental injustice. In the last Panchayat election they

voted two TMC representatives to Kusumpur Village Panchayat hoping that TMC would address their cause. Their support for Trinamool Congress enraged the local RSP leadership.

I visited Kusumpur after Aila. The families I met in North Kusumpur looked anxious and pensive. Most of the families had lost their houses and lived in temporary tents they set up near their broken huts. Their rice fields still looked waterlogged. Saline ingress had contaminated their ponds. They were anxious because they heard that the West Bengal government contemplated further land acquisition to rebuild the damaged embankments in the Sundarbans. Immediately after Aila these villagers took it upon themselves to repair and rebuild their broken dykes and successfully prevented the saline water from making any further inroads. The villagers were confident that the repair and rebuilding which they completed on a war footing would allow them some breathing space and enable them to buy time from the river. However, the possibility of further land acquisition was what made them feel apprehensive about their future in north Kusumpur. They concluded that a ring embankment would split Kusumpur into two separate islands. And this meant that residents of North Kusumpur would have to leave their habitat. Aila had already deprived them of the means of livelihood. Without much money left in their coffer these people were on the verge of facing an existential crisis.

Map 3



Source: Kusumpur Village Panchayat

The villagers' apprehension was found to be true when The Telegraph dated 5th November 2009 published a report on land acquisition in the post-Aila Sundarbans. The report stated:

The government...worked out a compensation package for 6000 acres [initially] to be acquired in the Sundarbans to build embankments...There was no official announcement on the amount to be offered but sources said it could be between Rs 5 lakh and Rs 6 lakh an acre...According to the package landowners will get the value of the land fixed by the government plus 30 per cent of it as solatium and an interest of 12 per cent a year from the date of declaration of valuation till the disbursement of the cheques. Registered sharecroppers will be offered 50 per cent of the value of their land and Rs 34,000. [The CPI-M Land Minister Rezzak Mollah] ruled out discussing the package with South 24 Parganas [district] Panchayat officials, who belong to Trinamool Congress and the Trinamool leader in charge of the district...did not rule out resistance to such acquisition (The Telegraph 2009b).

Embankment rebuilding is of crucial importance in post Aila Sundarbans. And there is no denying the fact that land acquisition is necessary to facilitate embankment rebuilding. But islanders' past experiences of land acquisition had made them suspicious about the government's intentions. The Government's compensation package did not include the landless agricultural labourers. Many families in North Kusumpur did not own any land. Frequent land acquisitions robbed them of their land and livelihood. Therefore, a question arises as to what happens to them in the event of their being forced to leave their village. Thus the Governmental package kept the poorest of the poor out of its purview.

Individual ponds were the only source of fresh water in the delta. Therefore, desalinization of ponds was as important a relief measure as embankment building. The task of desalinizing the ponds was entrusted to NGOs working in different parts of the Sundarbans. Non-governmental organizations were expected to carry out this programme under the supervision of the local village panchayats. It was decided that either the concerned NGO would take it upon itself to desalinize the ponds or would reimburse the owner if he decided to desalinize the pond on his own. To claim Government money the individual owners were required to have their applications signed by the heads (Pradhan) of their respective Village Panchayats. In the earlier section I discussed how Left-Trinamool rivalry revolved around the issue of pond desalinization in Basanti Block. Similarly, desalinization programme in Gosaba Block also had significant dimensions to it. In Kusumpur region of Gosaba Block this desalinization programme was entrusted to an NGO called Sundarbans Unnayan¹⁰ (Unnayan hereafter). Unnayan had its office in Kusumpur and had been working in the region for the last thirty years. Government fund was channeled to Unnayan to carry out this relief work. When I visited Kusumpur in July, I heard that a few days back the Village Panchayat office was ransacked by the residents of north Kusumpur. I also noticed Trinamool Congress posters on the walls of the Unnayan Office in Kusumpur which read: 'Stop politicizing the desalinization programme'.

When I asked the residents about this incident they stated that Unnayan carried out desalinization completely under the directives of the RSP dominated Kusumpur village Panchayat. When the first phase of desalinization was carried out ponds measuring a *bigha*¹¹ or more were selected for desalinization. Because of successive ring embankments and land acquisitions none of the residents of north Kusumpur owned ponds measuring a bigha. Therefore, their needs were bypassed by Unnayan. Without waiting for the second phase of desalinization to start the villagers hired machines to desalinize their ponds thinking that they would later claim the money from Unnayan. But when they went to the head (Pradhan) of Kusumpur panchayat to get

their applications signed, he refused to sign the papers saying that their ponds needed to be surveyed by the land surveyors. The residents of North Kusumpur waited for the surveyor who never came. When they realized that it was a ploy to make them suffer, they lost their patience. The villagers stormed into the Panchayat office and demanded explanation from the Panchayat officials present in the office. Anticipating this crisis the RSP Panchayat Pradhan left Kusumpur. When I asked the North Kusumpur residents about why they did not demand an explanation from the Unnayan functionaries, they stated that this was done at the connivance of RSP leadership. The Panchayat Pradhan and others made them suffer because of their support to the Trinamool Congress in the last election. The Unnayan functionaries were mostly RSP sympathizers and therefore they toed the line adopted by the RSP Panchayat.

However, the desalinization narrative that unfolded in the adjoining island of Garantala was equally interesting. Here the Trinamool Congress dominated Panchayat clearly stated that they would let Unnayan work only if the organization was ready to give the Trinamool leaders a portion of the desalinization fund. The Trinamool leaders also gave Unnayan a list of ponds that needed to be desalinated on a priority basis. These ponds belonged to people who were Trinamool leaders and sympathizers of Garantala. Unnayan started desalinization programme in Garantala but ultimately withdrew in the face of pressure from the Trinamool Panchayat. I heard this story while conversing with the Unnayan workers at their office in Kusumpur. The NGO workers were enthusiastic about narrating their experiences in Garantala, while they remained silent about their role in desalinization programme in North Kusumpur.

Total number of houses damaged and destroyed in Gosaba Block alone was 51,000. This clearly signifies the magnitude of devastation caused by Aila. It is perhaps needless to say that house reconstruction constituted a crucial component of governmental relief. The local Village Panchayats were directed to prepare a beneficiary-list so that government money could be made available to the homeless. While in Kusumpur I came across a significant news report. The report was published in *Anandabazar Patrika* dated 24th August 2009. The report stated:

Total number of households damaged in Gosaba Block were 51,000. The lists prepared by each village panchayat was full of anomalies and inconsistencies. People who were politically powerful and lived in pucca/concrete houses figured in these lists. Genuine people such as Ganga Mondal [70 year old] of Satjelia island, who did not have a house to live in, remained deprived (Anandabazar Patrika 2009; Author's translation).

Following the trail of the news report I reached the Gosaba Block Development Office to enquire about the authenticity of the news. What the Additional Block development Officer (ABDO) stated was the following:

The total number of houses in Gosaba Block was 51,000 and the total number of damaged houses submitted for compensation was 69,000. In each village Panchayat a committee consisting of four members [popularly known as four man committee] – village Panchayat Pradhan, opposition leader in the village Panchayat, representative of the Panchayat Samity Sabhapati and representative of Block Development Officer prepared the list of victims worthy of compensation. Irregularities and anomalies crept in at the time of preparing these lists. Because these lists were politically motivated, the government money had not reached the villagers still living in tents or cyclone relief shelters (Interview with ABDO).

Later in October 2009, the local newspaper *Aranyadoot* also published a report which suggested that after Aila unethical transactions concerning house reconstruction aid have become a common feature in the Sundarbans (Aranyadoot: 2009b). Kusumpur Village Panchayat was found implicated in this transaction whereby the locally powerful living in concrete houses used their

political clout to have their names included in the beneficiary-list. Some of the workers of the NGO, Unnayan, also had their names included in the list to grab the money. It is interesting to note that in Kusumpur the list was prepared jointly by the RSP Pradhan, Trinamool opposition leader in the Panchayat and two other officials mentioned above. This seems to suggest that despite rivalries and enmities between the Left and Trinamool Congress, they both collaborated to produce a beneficiary-list that compromised the genuine needs and interests of the Aila victims

People's vulnerability to hazard continues unabated (Oliver-Smith 1996:315) even when the ferocity of the hazard is formally over. Nothing demonstrates this more clearly than the state of governmentalized relief in Kusumpur in Gosaba. The pre-Aila embankment policy of the government has spelt disaster for the people. And Aila has only intensified their marginalization. We have also seen how governmentality is deeply implicated in local power struggle (confrontations and collaborations around the issues of desalinization and houses for the homeless). Here it is significant to observe the role of a local NGO. Instead of viewing NGOs as civil societal agents to fill the vacuum created by state inaction (Whitehead 2005), I see NGOs as vehicles through which governmental power is consolidated.

Summing Up

The paper aimed to enquire into cyclone Aila and governmentality of aid and relief in the Indian Sundarbans. To understand the enormity of Aila's devastation and the marginalization of the islanders, I portrayed a picture of pre-Aila Sundarbans. I attempted this portrayal to argue that people living in this forested delta have remained marginalized, marginalization here being induced by governmental rationalities. First there is conservationist rationality which has consolidated the Sundarbans' image as a wildlife sanctuary where people's livelihood needs are seen as threats to forest, wildlife and biodiversity. The Sundarbans can be best developed if it is left to grow as a natural habitat of tigers, crocodiles, monkeys and deer. According to this, rationality as manifest in the workings of Government Departments doing development for the people in the region. Interestingly, the peculiar geography and forested landscape, which are designated features of wilderness, are often cited as an excuse for the lack of effort on the part of government departments to improve material condition of the islanders such as strengthening embankments, building roads or improving agriculture (Jalais 2004:17). As a result people's needs remain unaddressed. I have also focused on the Irrigation Department's embankment building activities to show that even when people's needs are addressed, the way service is delivered reduces the so-called beneficiaries to mere objects of governmental power.

In the second section, I presented regional and local level newspaper reports to highlight the politics of relief distribution in the post-Aila Sundarbans. I drew on newspaper reports to show how Left-Trinamool rivalry is reflected in the governmental aid and relief distribution for the Aila victims particularly in Basanti and Gosaba Blocks of the Sundarbans. This section serves as a background against which I presented my case study i.e. Kusumpur island in Gosaba Block. Here my discussion has been restricted to three main components of relief i.e. embankment rebuilding, pond desalinization and house reconstruction for the homeless. I have argued that the enormity of Aila's devastation can be partly attributed to the absence of infrastructural facilities and of comprehensive development policy in the pre-Aila Sundarbans and partly to the way aid and relief was manipulated and usurped by competing party leaderships in the post-Aila Sundarbans.

Policies tend to construct their subjects as objects of power (Shore and Wright 1997:3) But policies also have the potential to assign a sense of agency and purpose to their subjects. Here we are not concerned with temporary and emergent embankment repair or setting up cyclone relief centres on islands. A comprehensive development policy means efforts on the part of the departments like Sundarban Affairs and Irrigation to establish information bank on river currents and erosion. This information bank can be used to prevent actual or potential displacement of people. Land acquisition can be justified only when it is accompanied by a definite policy of relocation with compensation, a relocation package that reaches different sections of the populace. Natural disasters like Aila cannot be prevented, but what can be prevented is the long-standing impact of such disasters. Aila that struck the Sundarbans was formally over. Emergency relief and aid has nearly stopped. Electronic and print media are no longer interested in Aila and the Sundarbans. People are still living in tents and on embankments. Their farmlands are destroyed by saline water. Their savings are nearly over. Now another Aila – hunger and starvation –has started in the Sundarbans. This Aila will not be as perceptible as the cyclone Aila. But its effects will be deep and far reaching.

Notes

¹ The island where I have primarily carried out my post Aila fieldwork has been named Kusumpur.

² I use the word Sundarbans, generally referred to in the plural, to denote the region composed of forests, inhabited mainland and islands and water bodies. However, government departments often refer to the region in the singular.

³ Ever since the partition of India in 1947, refugee rehabilitation had been an issue that confronted Government of India. Many East Bengali refugees who came to India from Bangladesh were settled by the central government in Dandya Karanya, a place that is part of Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. Before the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) came to power in West Bengal the refugees were given to understand that once the party came to power they would be settled in Bengal. During the Congress government of the 1950s and 60s, Jyoti Basu, the then opposition leader of the Left, presented their case in the Legislative Assembly and demanded later in a public meeting in 1974 that the Dandya Karanya refugees be settled in the Sundarbans (Mallick 1993:99). In 1977 when the Left-front came to power they found that the refugees had taken them at their word and in 1978 some 150,000 refugees arrived from Dandya Karanya (Mallick 1993:100). Seeing these refugees as obstacles to the economic recovery of the state, the left government forcibly sent these refugees back. However, about 30,000 refugees managed to cross the riverine delta area and settle in Marichjhapi, an island lying to the northernmost forested part of the Sundarbans. The Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu, who had once as opposition leader defended their case, now declared the occupation of Marichjhapi an illegal encroachment on Reserve Forest land, on the state and on the World Wildlife Fund sponsored tiger protection project (Mallick 1999:115). The government deployed police launches to cut off refugee settlers' supplies. Their huts were razed, their fisheries and tube-wells destroyed. When the settlers tried crossing the river for food and water their boats were sunk. To clear the island the police opened fire killing thirty-six people. Forty-three more died of starvation, twenty-nine from disease and 128 from drowning when their boats were sunk by the police (Mallick 1993:101). For further discussion see N. Chatterjee (1992) pp 291-379 and also R. Mallick (1993) pp 97-103, and (1999) pp 104-125.

⁴ The Ganga is a major river of Northern India. Near Farakka in Murshidabad in West Bengal, the Ganga divides and flows in two directions: one into Bangladesh (called the Padma) and the other towards the south of Bengal (called the Hooghly).

⁵ Malda and Murshidabad are two districts of West Bengal, both being situated on the banks of the Ganga.

⁶ Left-front that is in power in West Bengal for the last 32 years, is a coalition of four main parties. They are Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) as the dominant partner, Communist Party of India (CPI), Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) and Forward Bloc (FB). This front came to power in West Bengal in 1977.

⁷ Buddhadeb Bhattacharyya's visit was significant in view of the fact that in the Parliamentary election prior to this visit the left parties lost all the Sundarbans constituencies to the Trinamool Congress.

⁸ Zilla Parishad is the district level panchayat body (uppermost tier of the three-tier panchayat structure in West Bengal). The South 24 Parganas Zilla Parishad which is housed in the District Magistrate's Office in the district headquarter is under the control of Trinamool Congress. The Parishad has 73 elected seats out of which TMC has got 34 (and formed the Board) CPI-M 26, RSP and Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI) each having 5 seats and Congress 3.

⁹ A mouja is a revenue village.

¹⁰ For the purposes of confidentiality the NGO is named Sundarbans Unnayan

¹¹ *Bigha* denotes a local unit of measurement, which is roughly equal to a third of an acre. Although *bigha* does not constitute a part of the official system of measurement, people prefer to use this for calculating their cultivable land and other immovable property.

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