

Transformation from being peasants to Climate Refugees – A case study of 5 Indian Sunderban Villages...

“The Sundarbans are a network of tidal channels, rivers, creeks and islands. Some of these islands are mere swampy morasses, covered with low forest and scrubwood jungle, but those to the north, which are embanked, grow rich crops of rice. As one approaches the coast, the land gradually declines to an elevation throughout many hundred square miles [that] is scarcely raised above high-water mark. This scabbarid area is a typical specimen of new deltaic formation. It exhibits the process of landmaking in an unfinished state, and presents the last stage in the life of a great river the stage in which it emerges through a region of half land, half water, almost imperceptibly, into the sea” (O'Malley, Bengal District Gazetteer, S 24 Parganas). That is how L.S.S O'Malley described the Sunderbans in 1914. Life under the colonial and the post colonial days is not very different for the islands or its dwellers.

An International border separated thier administration between India and Bangladesh. Definitely the population of these islands has gone up by leaps and bounds yet infrastructurally they are still back in the fifties. Most of these islands do not have electricity courtesy of the fact that they are highly inaccessible. Like O' Malley had described they are a “network of tidal channels”, thus in order to reach some of the interior islands, one has to change boats some three to four times. Just to clarify these boats are mere country boats where the passsengers brave the weather by sitting on the frames of the boat, mere inches above the water infected with crocodiles. Yes, earlier all these boats were moved by oars but now they have a diesel engine. Once you reach these islands either mud jetties or slimy, half cracked cemented ones greet you. At the time of independence, all the roads were mud roads. In the last sixty years, a few have been converted to concrete ones, and some others into brick roads. Thus during monsoons and floods reaching the interior areas of these islands becomes very tricky. The locals ususally prefer building mud houses for it is too risky to spend money on concrete houses for there is no gurantee, of it surviving for a long time due to the frequent flooding and erosion on these islands.

The mangrove forests on these islands also act as a major carbon sink and helps in cleaning the environement. The existense of the mangroves is crucial for the survival of these islands. Afforestation measures are urgently required

These islands are simultenuosly being eroded and built by nature. Thus though land is being built on one side, again somewhere else it is been eaten away. The process of land erosion was tried to be halted by building mud embankments by the British in the nineteenth century. Under them the embankment was maintaineded by the people themselves, however later scholars have pointed out that the process of construction of these embankments was not very scientific and as a result they could not keep the saline water away from the islands for a long time. Rising sea levels is threatening these embankments like never before.

Breakages in the embankment due to weathering and sudden floods are very frequent and as a result saline water gushes in people's land and spoils their crop and land. Agricultural production goes down as a result. Since the current dwellers settled on these islands in the eighteenth century, they have always been subsistence farmers but things have only become worse for them with time. Large family sizes have shrunk the land holdings further. Fishing is a important livelihood in Sunderbans but primarily in the western islands which are open to the sea. Collection of forest resources is definitely not an easy way of earning either. Thus in order to survive, increasing number of youth are migrating out of these islands. Some are seasonal migrants while many others for permanent ones.

My study in the Sunderbans was based on the problems of development and planning in the Sunderbans under Prof. Swapna Banerjee-Guha and part of my Masters in Development Studies(2010-2012). I had carried out by data collection in 5 villages, namely, Beguakhali(Sagar Block), Rangabelia, Pakhiralaya, Gosaba(Gosaba Block) and Masjidbari (Basanti Block) of the South 24 Parganas. I spoke to various experts, government officials and read the works of both the parties and came to the conclusion that participatory development, afforestation of mangroves,

regular maintenance of the embankments and improving the infrastructure in these islands may make them a little more stable and sustainable for the residents.

These islands have a huge impact on the environment. Their survival is essential to keep Bangladesh and West Bengal safe from the vagaries of nature. Yet not much has been done for their survival.

Since the phenomenal 5 year development Plans began in India, a lot of development policies has been executed in different parts and sectors of India. Industrial growth, increase in financial resources and opening the Indian economy to the world has revolutionised the country. However the Sunderban islands, apart from serving a very important ecological role also provides a good amount of revenues to both Bangladesh and India. Shrimp farming is a very lucrative business there, however it is usually the middle men or the rich fishermen who benefit from it, the poor labourers who do the back breaking work are hardly adequately paid. Even eco tourism in the eastern Sunderbans earn revenues for rich entrepreneurs who are able to pay for the initial set up but the locals there cannot compete with such money. And thus the only option left to the people in Sunderbans is to migrate out from their homes.

The forces of political economy which helps the strong to accumulate while the have nots get dispossessed in the post colonial economy of our country is slowly and steadily dispossessing the dwellers of these ecologically fragile islands to distant lands and turning them into vulnerable climate refugees.

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