

The West Bengal Sundarban and its Small-Scale Fishing Community

A Quick Discussion

What's in a spelling?

The original word, as pronounced in Bengali, is *shundorbon* which simply meant the dense forests of deltaic-coastal Bengal, characterized by the tiger, the crocodile, and the *kamot* (any of the few species of Sundarbans river sharks). Originally, there was only one *Shundorbon*, which, after the partition of India, split up into two Shundorbon, that of Bangladesh and of West Bengal (India)

It was the British, who altered the pronunciation and, strangely, pluralized the word, to *Sundarbans*.

It was this Anglicized version that ruled the roost in international usages and academic publications. Even when the Bangladesh forests were designated a Ramsar Site, it was called described as the *Sundarbans Reserved Forest*.

The Bengali official English version, however, *was and continues to be* simply 'Sundarban'. In independent India, this is the spelling that usually occurred in government documents.

Thankfully, when the Indian Sundarban received the Ramsar recognition, Sundarbans gave way to Sundarban. One hopes that this now will acquire general international acceptance.

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Whence the name?

- The name 'Sundarban' is supposed to have been derived from the Sundari tree (*Heritiera fomes*), a mangrove species once abundant in the region, but now imperilled by increasing salinity. It has become scarce in the West Bengal Sundarban but it is still to be found in modest numbers in the Bangladesh Sundarban, particularly in the eastern stretches.

The Sundari



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Incidentally, this is true for a few other species as well, most prominent of which is the Poshur (Black Mangrove *Avicennia germinans*)

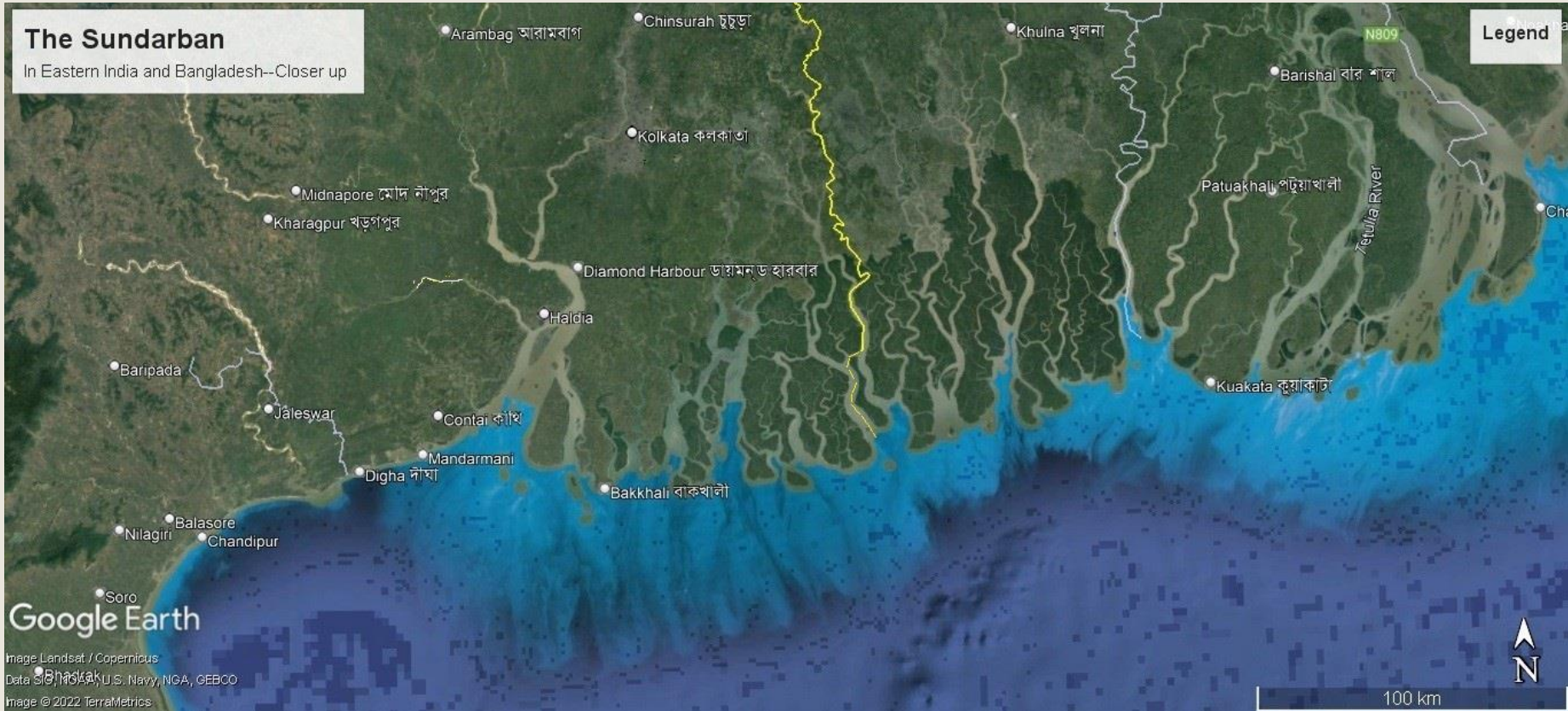


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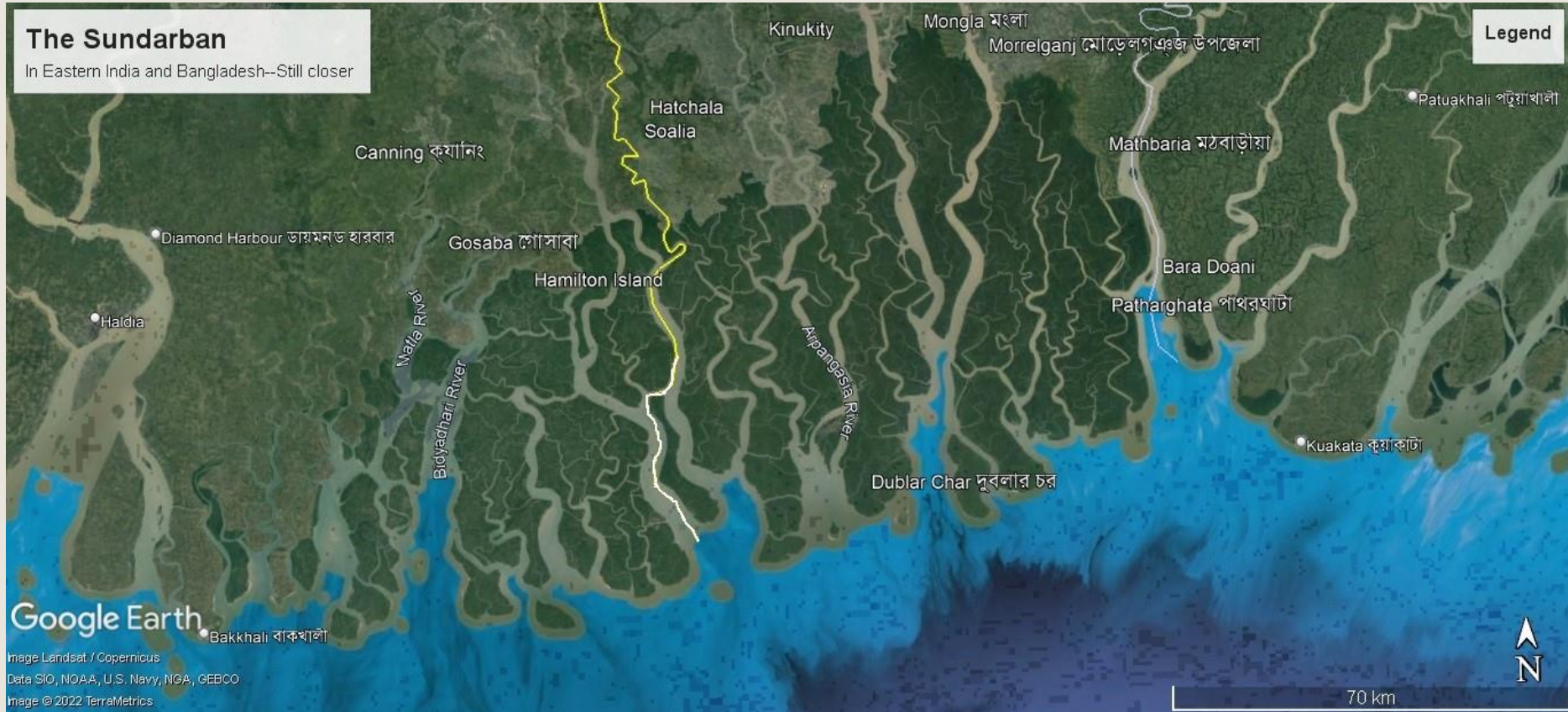
Where?



Closer up



Still closer



Bhatir Desh—The Land of tides



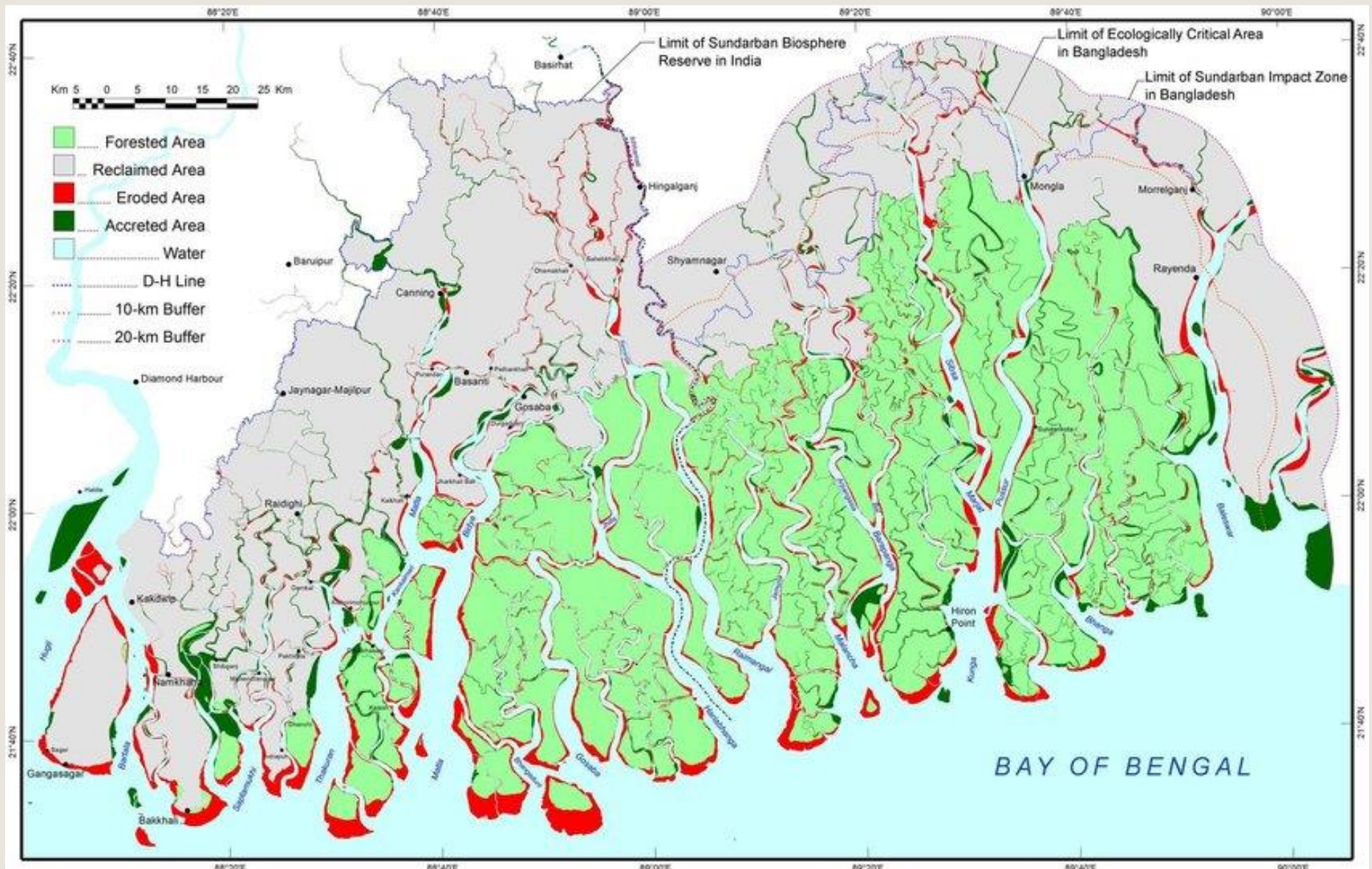
Forests uninhabited by humans

These are forest uninhabited by humans.

Normally, such has been the case for the last few hundred years, long before the British started planning to 'open up' the Sundarban to colonization.

Of course, archaeological remains of settlements have been found in areas bordering the Matla, in places where there are now dense jungles, indicating that some parts were inhabited. However, these remains tend to indicate a much earlier period. Prior to their modern colonization , there seem to be no serious evidence of habitation in the Sundarban during the last 5-6 centuries.

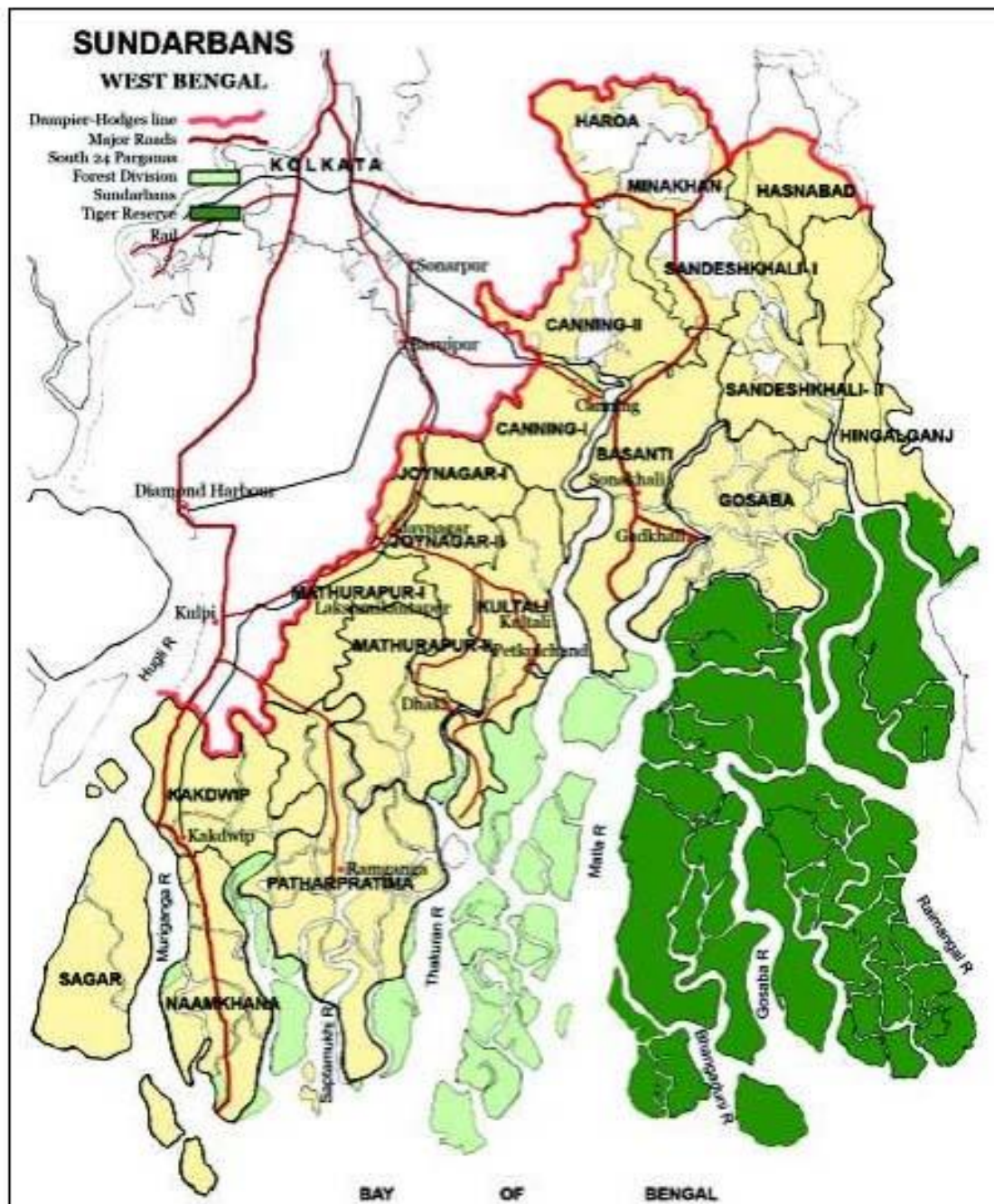
But where do the people, including the
fishers, live?



DISHA

Sundarban Biosphere Reserve

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The whole is called the Sundarban

The term Sundarban has two meanings:

- 1) Only the forested areas
- 2) The whole of the area that has been designated the Sundarbans Biosphere Reserve

Some 222 years ago, the whole, or almost the whole, of the of the area now designated as the Sundarbans Biosphere Reserve was forested.

Atharo bhatir Desh—the land of umpteen tides and the dynamic estuary

Now, most, if not all, of the zone beneath the Dampier-Hodges Line (drawn in 1829-30) can be said to be geomorphologically dynamic to various extents. Storm surges, tidal action, and siltation continuously determine and transform the features of the land.

Bhatir Desh—The inhabited parts are above the water only at low tide





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Traditional rights of fishers in the Sundarban waters

- Although the evidence is sparse and vague, it seems that fishers possibly came to the Sundarban to fish and collect honey even before the colonial period.
- However, for the colonial period, we have definite evidence in favour of traditional rights.

Colonial recognition of the rights of fishers in the Sundarban waters

William Hunter writes in *The Statistical Account of Bengal*:

The right to fish in the navigable channels of the Sundarbans is public, and no revenue for it is now collected on behalf of Government. In 1866, Government put up to auction the rights of fisheries in all the Sundarban rivers for a term of five years, but liable at any time to resumption after six months' previous notice. The Port Canning Company purchased the fishing rights, but they were withdrawn in October 1868, in consequence of the claims of the Company being disputed by fishermen and others who had prescriptive rights; and it was then finally decided that the Government had not the right to farm out the fisheries in tidal waters to private persons.

Other evidence

- There are several other pieces of evidence indicating the recognition of rights of the fishers to fish in the waters of the Sundarban, including recognition by the Forest Authorities.
- After the Reserved Forest was declared in 1928 and 1943 (in Basirhat and Namkhana ranges respectively), fishing boats were required to be registered in the Forest Directorate on payment of usual registration fees. Moreover, the fishers had to pay a small amount for dry firewood to be consumed in each fishing trip.

The First Management Plan

In fact, the First Management Plan of the Sundarban Tiger Reserve (prepared in the 1970s) categorically mentions certain specific forestry activity hitherto allowed within the area where the Tiger Reserve had been created and also mentions the freedom of the fishers to fish in tidal waters.

CHAPTER-III.

3. PRESENT MANAGEMENT PROGRAMMES

3.1. Forestry operations

The forests of Sunderbans are exploited under selection-cum-improvement felling. The various forestry operations are given below :-

- i) Selection felling of trees for firewood and timber over 1/20th of the area each year by permit holders.
- ii) Exploitation of Golpatta and Hantal wherever available over the whole area annually by permit holders.
- iii) Silvicultural operation - raising of plantation of cocconut in banks and forest areas as per approved scheme.
- iv) Exploitation of honey through-out the area during April-May by permit holders.
- v) Patrolling of forests by watercrafts.
- vi) Shell is disposed of by issue of permits.
- vii) Fishing is allowed free in tidal waters but permits are issued to registered boats for consumption of dry firewood for each fishing trip.

Firewood, timber, fish, shell etc. operations are confined in the south during fair weather and in the northern zone during rough weather.

3.2.& 3.3. Existing wild life conservation measures etc.

The existing staff of the territorial division look after the protection of wild life in

And then came the implementation of the schemes of the Tiger Reserve in the Sundarban through the 1970s and early 1980s.

The total Sundarban Tiger Reserve (STR) was created within the Sundarban Reserve Forest and was about 2,585 sq km in area.

It consisted of two portions—the core area and the buffer zone.

The buffer zone consisted of (i) areas where restricted access was allowed to fishers and honey collectors; (ii) Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS), where also activities such as fishing and honey collecting were disallowed.

The arithmetic of restriction

- ২,৫৮৫ বর্গ কিলোমিটার টাইগার রিজার্ভের মধ্যে, আজ ১,৭০০ বর্গ কিলোমিটার হল কোর এরিয়া।
- বাকি ৮৮৫ বর্গ কিলোমিটার হল বাফার এলাকা।
- এই ৮৮৫ বর্গ কিলোমিটার বাফার এলাকার সবটুকুই কিন্তু সাধারণভাবে মানুষের ব্যবহারের জন্য নয়। এর মধ্যে আছে প্রায় ৩৬৩ বর্গ কিলোমিটার সজনেখালি অভয়ারণ্য। ফলে, মাছ ধরা বা মধু সংগ্রহের জন্য রয়েছে ৫২২ বর্গ কিলোমিটারের মতো

Conservation without consent

Some problems