

Exiled at Home

Every day, in the guise of development, new threats undermine the livelihood opportunities of fishing communities in the Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove forest

The Sundarbans comprise a mangrove area in the delta formed by the confluence of the Ganga, Brahmaputra and Meghna Rivers in the Bay of Bengal. Spread across parts of India and Bangladesh, it is the world's largest mangrove forest. And it has fallen prey to capitalism. Unbridled and indiscriminate growth of tourism is wreaking havoc on the ecosystem. Activities of the forest department threaten to evict the poor and marginalized residents of the area; livelihoods are under constant attack; new threats undermine the livelihood opportunities of the fishers every day.

Today, the people who depend on the mangrove ecosystem for their livelihoods have become exiles in their own houses. They barely manage to subsist as mangroves are cut down, as hotels come up in hordes. The 'tiger widows' and their poverty-stricken neighbourhoods have become special tourist attractions. Resorts and watch towers are springing up in forest department offices and camps deep inside the forest, defying the actual goals of Project Tiger.

The fishers in the area are not allowed to use mechanized boats for fear of pollution, even as thick smoke billows from tourist boats fitted with high-powered engines. Legal restrictions are meant only for the poor, it seems, and do not apply to the tourism business and the activities of a favoured few.

The process of evicting forest-dependent people from the Sundarbans began in colonial India and continued after the country's independence. The present government of the province of West Bengal has set out to hammer the final nails into the coffin. Recently, the

process of incorporating 1,044.68 sq km of reserve forest in Matla, Raidighi and Ramganga ranges into the Sundarban Tiger Reserve (STR) has been completed. The 2023 proposal by the Chief Wildlife Warden of West Bengal, submitted to the National Tiger Conservation Authority for technical clearance and cleared in January 2024, spares not a shred of thought for the fate of ordinary people dependent on these forests. Several wildlife organizations and tourism entrepreneurs have backed the initiative.

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Of the above-mentioned reserve forest situated between the Matla and Thakuran Rivers, 556.45 sq km has already been designated as the West Sundarban Wildlife Sanctuary. In the remaining 488.23 sq km area, fishing was permitted. But that area has now been acquired for STR. What then is left for the fishers? Forest officials and wildlife lovers have a pat answer: What is there to fear? Although it has been brought under STR, the area has been designated a 'buffer' and remains an area where fishing is permitted.

However, this bureaucratic reply does not dispel the fishers' fears; they know after some time the entire buffer zone will become a Critical Tiger Habitat (CTH) and fishers will be evicted. This happened in 2007, when, in addition to the entire core area of STR, 369.53 sq km of Kholabada, a fishing-

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Natural fishing harbour inside Chandanpiri Forest in Paschim Bada of Sundarban, India. With the Sundarbans becoming a reserve forest, the communities lost their intrinsic right to pursue livelihoods in the area

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permitted area, was declared a CTH; the fishers were expelled. Traditionally, the fishers have used mechanized boats in the above-mentioned fishing area. If that now becomes a 'buffer' within STR, mechanized boats will no longer be permitted, as these are not allowed within STR. Yet, these same rules do not apply for surveillance and tourist boats that operate with high-powered engines.

In 1928, the colonial government imposed restrictions on forest-based livelihoods by declaring most of the Sundarban Protected Forest in the undivided 24 Parganas district as a reserve forest. The remaining Protected Forest was also declared reserve forest in 1943.

With the Sundarbans becoming a reserve forest, the communities lost their intrinsic right to pursue livelihoods in the area. The few livelihood avenues and practices that remained continued only at the whim

and fancy of the forest department. In 1973, the government took the first step to evict fishers from the rivers, creeks and forests of the Sundarbans. In the Sundarbans forest, estimated to be of some 4,264 sq km in area, the Pub Bada, situated east of the Matla River, had the most fish wealth. In this area was established STR, measuring 2,584.89 sq km. Out of this area, 1,330.10 sq km was declared as the 'core' area, kept out of bounds for fishers.

In 1976, certain parts outside the core, namely, the 'buffer', were designated the Sajnekhali Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS), measuring 362.40 sq km. Thus, after 1976, fishing was permitted in only 892.39 sq km. The remaining 1,692.50 sq km of STR was definitively out of bounds for fishers. They called this the Bandhabada, meaning forbidden forest. According to the fishers, 70 per cent of the total fish of the entire Sundarbans are to be found in this area; the remaining

892.39 sq km of Kholabada (the open zone) yields only 15 per cent of the fish available in the entire Sundarbans.

Before STR was established in the 2,584.89 sq km of forest, there were about 8,000 fishing boats. After STR was established, only 923 boats were given boat license certificates (BLCs) for fishing in the 892.39-sq km Kholabada area. After STR was established in 1973, 1,679.11 sq km of forest area on the west side of the Matla River, referred to as the Paschim Bada, remained as reserve forest. Three years later, in 1976, about 44 sq km of this forest was declared a wildlife sanctuary. Only 5 per cent of the total fish in the entire Sundarbans can be found there. The remaining 1,635.16 sq km of reserve forest account for only 10 per cent of the total fish production from the Sundarbans. Around 3,700 boats have been granted BLCs and allowed to access this 10 per cent.

The number of fishers fishing in the Sundarbans has been estimated as over 100,000. Some fish in boats while others, fishing in waters adjoining their villages, often do not need boats. However, only those fishing in boats with proper BLCs have legal access to the forests. Unfortunately, only 4,623 boats have permission to fish in the Sundarban forests (923 for the original STR and 3,700 for the non-STR reserve forest). The usual number of fishers per boat is three. Therefore, about 14,000 fishers have legal access to the forests.

Hunger overrides all legislation, however. Thus, most of those fishing or hunting crabs in the traditional fishing grounds of the Sundarbans do so without permission. As a result, they are now seen as unwanted 'intruders' in the very areas they have been frequenting for generations to earn a livelihood. When caught by forest department guards, the fishers are subjected to indescribable humiliation—hefty bribes, beatings, destruction of food and water, confiscation of fish and crabs, and pouring of water into the oil tanks of mechanized boats. The officials often destroy the rudders and oars of the boats.

To evade the forest department officials, fishers row their boats deep

into the narrow forest creeks, where many fall prey to tiger attacks. They thus jeopardize the future of the entire family for the prospect of a little extra income. Even those with BLCs are not immune from persecution. Since the Kholabada has fewer fish resources, the fishers also enter the core or WLS areas to fish. The punishment is a fine of ₹1,150. A second-time offender must pay twice that amount. The third-time offender must pay twice the amount paid for the second offence, and so on. This principle of proportionately increasing fines results in extortion with impunity by government officers and employees.

In time, the boats with BLCs become old and break down. Added to that fact, many BLC owners have quit fishing but, for reasons unknown, their licences are not cancelled. The BLCs continue to be rented out as belonging to 'absentee owners'. Even when a BLC is cancelled, the forest department takes no initiative to re-issue it in the name of some other eligible fisher. Those who do not own a BLC try to rent one to avoid harassment. However, the demand for BLCs is many times greater than the number of BLCs available for rent. Hence, the rent keeps increasing and has now exceeded ₹100,000.

The Kholabada area of the STR, which requires high-rent BLCs, has shrunk in size. In 2007, the forest department declared a further area of 369.53 sq km as CTH. This brought down the area of Kholabada to only 522.86 sq km. It was this part of Kholabada that, along with the WLS, mentioned as a 'buffer' in 2009. Further, 556.45 sq km of the 1,635.16-sq km fishing area was declared as the West Sundarban Wildlife Sanctuary in 2013. The catch area was thus reduced to 1,078.71 sq km. In this way, the fishers have been steadily pushed into an ever-decreasing area of operation. This is how, for 50 years since 1973, the fishers of the Sundarbans have continued to retreat. In the last 50 years, about 50,000 boats belonging to the poor marginal fishers of the Sundarbans have been seized by Forest Department officers and have been rotting in its offices. Depending on

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Fishing in Pub Bada, Sundarban Tiger Reserve, India. Legal restrictions are meant only for the poor, it seems, and do not apply to the tourism business and the activities of a favoured few

size and quality, these boats are valued between ₹30,000 and ₹300,000. At an average price of ₹50,000, the total loss is estimated at ₹2,500 million.

Around 500,000 nets of the poor fishers seized by forest department officers have been ruined. Each net costs anything from ₹3,000 to ₹30,000. At an average of ₹5,000, the total loss is about ₹2,500 million. In the last 50 years, about 8,000 women have become widows after their husbands fell prey to tiger attacks. How does one estimate the monetary value of such a loss? However, the government has come up with a figure for the compensation! The family of a fisher who dies in a tiger attack gets a total of ₹1,24,000. Of this, ₹500,000 is payable by the forest department; ₹500,000 from the Prime Minister's Matsya Sampada Yojana; ₹200,000 from the state government's Matsyajibi Bandhu Scheme; and ₹40,000 from

the National Family Benefit Scheme (NFBS). (Whether the fisher's family actually gets all this money in hand is a different question altogether!) Thus, by government estimates, the compensation handed out to the 8,000 fishers who died in tiger attacks in the last 50 years is ₹992 million! at current rates. But what price can be fixed for all the injuries, humiliation and tears that, for the past 50 years, hundreds of poor marginalized fishermen have had to endure?

What has been gained from the Sundarbans in the last 50 years? Reportedly, there are only 103 tigers left, 79 of which live inside STR and the remaining 24 in the reserve forests. The fishing community has had to bear the cost of supporting these tigers, instead of the society at large. When STR was established, it had no legal basis. Neither did the 923 BLCs originally issued. And how was this number

arrived at? This question has not been answered by the STR administration till date. The forest department did not feel the need to consult with, and obtain the consent of, the fishers dependent on the forest before declaring the West Sundarbans Wildlife Sanctuary in 2013. Also, before finalizing the decision to include 1,044.68 sq km of the forest area of Matla, Raidighi and Ramganga ranges of the three reserve forest ranges in the STR, the fishers were not consulted even, let alone asked for their consent.


As a result of this scheme, only two ranges—Bhagbatpur and Namkhana—will remain outside STR. Soon, these two ranges will also enter STR as the latest in this 100-year long conspiracy to evict fishers from the Sundarbans. The impending disaster affects not only the fishers of the Sundarbans, but also the villages near the Sundarban forests. One often hears of a tiger entering a village. Why has it done so? The answer is evident. The Royal Bengal Tiger finds it difficult to get the food it requires within the forest. A tiger consumes five to 15 kg of meat a day and a full-sized male tiger can eat even up to 30 kg in a day. On average, if a tiger consumes roughly 10 kg of meat per day, then, in a year, an average of about 3.65 tonnes of meat will be needed per tiger. Thus, in round figures, a hundred tigers in the Sundarbans require 365 tonnes of meat annually. If the average weight of a full-grown wild boar or deer is 50 kg, then 7,300 such animals will be needed to feed 100 tigers in a year.

Besides, there are animals like jackals, fishing cats and so on in the forest which also need meat. With so many animals getting killed in a year, how long will the Sundarbans be able to provide sustenance for 103 tigers? And what if, in the coming days, the number of tigers increases from the current level of 103? Unless there are appropriate plans for meeting the nutrition needs of an increasing tiger population, what is to prevent the tigers from entering the forests adjoining villages of the Sundarbans in search of food?

These questions point to another dilemma. As the number of wild animals being slaughtered in the Sundarbans forests to provide for 103 tigers is so large, how many wild animals other than tigers are left surviving in the forest? And if they are surviving in ample numbers, then a doubt arises: are there really 103 tigers in all in the Sundarban forest? Or is there some other story behind the immense expenditure, endless persecution and monumental injustice being perpetrated in the Sunderbans?

In order to display benevolence and good faith, and build stable relations with the villagers, the forest department is undertaking development work by bringing the villages adjoining the forest under Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMCs). However, some argue that the real objective of the move is to use the JFMC members to gather information about those who are fishing in the forest without permission. Moreover, providing the JFMC villages with special financial facilities creates bad blood between the villages receiving the benefits and the remaining. Therefore, when, in the not-too-distant future, the villages adjoining the forests that receive benefits need to be evacuated to increase the area for tigers, these villagers will not receive sympathy and support from their unprivileged neighbours.

Largest mangrove forest

Over 100,000 poor fishers of the Sundarbans remain endangered as the state government of West Bengal, with the active co-operation of some wildlife conservation NGOs and the tourism business sector, continues to devastate the largest mangrove forest in the world. 

For more



Unchecked avarice and abuse of power push Sundarban fishers to the brink

<https://milandas1978.blogspot.com/2024/11/unchecked-avarice-and-abuse-of-power.html>

The Sundarbans Fishers: Coping in an Overly Stressed Mangrove Estuary

<https://www.icsf.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/930.ICSF145.pdf>

Profits and Perils of Farming Fish: Case Studies of Shrimp and Carp Aquaculture in West Bengal

https://www.icsf.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/930.ICSF228_West-Bengal_Santanu_Chacraverti.pdf

Fishing Community Issues in the Sundarban Tiger Reserve (STR): Report

<https://www.icsf.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/930.ICSF025.pdf>