

Challenges of conservation, cyclones and COVID-19 in the lives of Sundarban residents

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For the past 18 months, the residents of the Sundarbans region in eastern India have been combating the threefold challenges of COVID-19 (a health emergency), cyclones (natural calamities) and conservation (rules that make access to forest difficult). The Sundarbans is the largest single mangrove ecosystem in the world, spanning India and Bangladesh and is inhabited by around 4.5 million people in India.

The present distressed situation of the residents in Sundarbans is an outcome of human attempts to control nature and modify nature-based living practices. Both COVID-19 and cyclones are products of environmental distress.

Developmental activities in the Indian Sundarbans region

We need to unpack the last three decades of developmental activities in the Indian Sundarbans region to understand why the islanders are currently trapped in this delta. The construction of roads and bridges is one of the key developmental initiatives that the islanders have witnessed. It has eased out movement for the residents and has allowed them to venture into the city for livelihoods. It has also changed the livelihood patterns of people in this region.

Earlier, the people in Sundarbans depended on forest-based livelihoods, but now we often observe that the islanders, particularly the youth, benefit from various government and non-governmental institutions. They develop new skills to transit from forest-based livelihoods to city-based ones. As a result, most young men work as daily labourers in cities far and near. The women migrate seasonally to meet the financial needs of the families.

Both daily transition and seasonal transition from the island to the city have been disrupted because of the COVID lockdown. The islanders have returned to their homes and the lockdown here constrained their movements for livelihood opportunities. They now have no option but to rely on government and non-governmental aid or depend on collection-oriented forest-based livelihoods.

Conservation and livelihoods

When the islanders are forced to return to the creeks and forests to fulfill their daily needs, they are at risk of interactions with the royal Bengal tiger of the Sundarbans. Due to the conservation effort for the royal Bengal tiger, its population has increased from 88 to 96 in one year (2018-19 to 2019-20). In contrast, the mangrove cover has gone down by two percent in two years (2017-19). This illustrates that the tiger density is significantly increasing in this region, and this undoubtedly upsurges the risk of forest-based livelihoods.

Forest-based livelihoods require specific skills, and individuals hone these skills through years of engagement. When one discards this traditional livelihood and does not regularly visit the forest and its adjacent creeks, the skills start waning. For example, the occupation of honey gathering requires physical strength, attentiveness to the surroundings, cohesion to follow the group, and courage to dwell in the forest. Even for fishing and crab collection, an individual is required to live in the forest vicinity and employ all these skills. Without being in touch with these skills, if an individual takes up forest-based livelihoods, there is a greater risk of getting attacked by tigers. The lack of courage does not allow the victim to fight back when attacked; they surrender.

Other than the threat of tigers, strict vigilance and stringent conservation rules make islanders' access to the forest difficult. Fishers sometimes opt to sneak past the tighter surveillance, and to bypass forest guards, they often opt for risky paths, which makes them more vulnerable to tiger

attacks. Also, according to the government laws, they become trespassers, there is no support system and or scope for compensation in case of attacks. The dismissal of the islanders' right to the forest areas creates a hindrance in this crisis for survival.

Cyclones and livelihoods

While islanders struggle to make both ends meet and find themselves unwelcome in their own homeland, they also have to brave natural calamities. In the past three years, three cyclones Bulbul, Amphan, and Yaas have impacted different parts of the Sundarbans Delta. In the last 12 years, particularly after Cyclone Aila in 2009, one of the major agendas of the Sundarbans development was the concretisation of the embankment. A lump sum amount was spent on converting mud embankments to concrete ones and making them high enough to combat the rising tide lines. However, wide-spread flooding of islands due to water influx during Cyclone Yaas in G-Plot, Pathar Pratima or Sagar, brings the effectiveness of those embankments under the scanner. The slew of cyclones has left the islanders in distress, and they are losing the bare minimum resources that they had. It leaves the islanders with no choice but to rely on aid. How long the aid will keep them going is another question.

The Sundarbans have received sufficient government and non-governmental aid in terms of food, water, and other essential items, due to global awareness. Up until now, Sundarban islanders had carved their way to live a life of dignity. They settled in these islands even after fighting against the challenges that the wilderness presented to them; in the past, they struggled to earn enough from natural resource-based livelihoods.

COVID-19 and livelihoods

Once they realised that the resource-based livelihood opportunities in Sundarbans were depleting, the residents migrated to cities and adjusted to a different life there. However, now that they have moved back during the lockdown, they face an uncertain future with COVID-19, cyclones and conservation barriers to their livelihoods, just as uncertain as the delta's future.

Experts say that the outbreak of COVID-19 is triggered by ecological imbalance and that the increased frequency and intensity of cyclones are caused by climate change. Biodiversity conservation is touted as the single bullet that can effectively restore the ecological balance of such sensitive bio-regions, minimise the damage of natural calamities, combat COVID-like future pandemics and mitigate climate change.

Now, the Sundarbans need external forces to sustain the islands, and the islanders are also in need of the same. The global community is coming together to preserve this mangrove ecology and allow it to rejuvenate. We need the same level of global collaboration and rehabilitation policies for the critically threatened islanders of Ghoramara, Sagar or Mousumi so that the residents there can lead dignified lives.

Source: <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/environment/over-34-lakh-tonnes-of-plastic-waste-generated-in-fy-2019-20-govt-7193431.html>