

Debate

The Sundarbans: Whose World Heritage Site?

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Abstract:

Keywords:

INTRODUCTION

IN 2002, THE SUPREME COURT OF INDIA ordered the eviction of fishermen from the island of Jambudwip. Jambudwip is an island in West Bengal customarily used by fishermen as their base to catch and dry fish during the fishing season. The main reason for their eviction was to make way for a Rs. 5.4 billion tourism project sanctioned by the West Bengal government to the Sahara India Group. The Sahara India Group's project was to build a 'world

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class city-centre spread over 250 km² of water surface' planning to include a business centre, a cinema theatre, a cultural centre, club houses, health clubs, a helipad, etc. Advertising 'virgin islands' and beaches of 'pristine glory', this 'dream' tourist destination guaranteed a service of 'global standing' on floating boat houses where one was assured of finding all at the same time a casino, scuba diving facilities and a tiger (*Panthera tigris*) breeding centre. In other words, it guaranteed to be, in the words of Sekhsaria, a modern tourism blockbuster (13/6/2004).

The Sundarbans are a truly unique ecosystem. Apart from providing home to an important number of rare and endangered flora and fauna, it is the only mangrove forest in the world inhabited by tigers. The problem with the hugely ambitious Sahara project was that it posed an important threat to this already extremely fragile ecosystem. The impunity with which the environmental and social concerns were neglected in the planning of the project could, and I quote from Sekhsaria again, 'certainly be called spectacular, if indeed they were not so serious and "deadly"' (13/6/2004). However, the timely efforts of a team of independent observers (including amongst others Bonani and Pradip Kakkar of People United for Better Living In Calcutta (PUBLIC), Kolkata; Bombay Environment Action Group (BEAG), Mumbai, and the Bangalore-based EQUATIONS (2004) that works on issues related to tourism) and of renowned novelist Amitav Ghosh (2004) raised the alert and the project was stalled, at least for the time being.

What I would like to dwell upon in this piece, through the contrasting images of fishermen being evicted from Jambudwip on the one hand and the Sahara India Group's advertisement of their project on 'virgin islands' on the other, are the implications, for the wider world, that humans do not or should not fit in the Sundarbans. The Sahara Group's projection of the Sundarbans is yet another representation, in a long list of representations, where the islanders of the Sundarbans are seen as superfluous. But the Sundarbans *are* not just forest or *jangol*, they are also an inhabited region or *abad*¹. I feel that we need to address the urge for omitting people from images and islands of the Sundarbans if we are to engage with the concern raised by Rangarajan and Shahabuddin—that of the need to have more knowledge sharing between biologists and social scientists (2006: 361). This is because the peddling of such images, whether for wildlife preservation or in current bids at rebranding the place for the purposes of global marketing, will increase the alienation between the inhabitants of the Sundarbans and its wildlife.

THE SUNDARBANS: DANGEROUS LOCALE, POOR ISLANDERS

In their modern phase, the Sundarbans were reclaimed largely between 1765 and 1970. If the islands located to the north and west of the region are safer from the storms and cyclones coming from the Bay of Bengal and have fertile

soil well irrigated by canals, the islands on the fringe of the forest, in contrast, are less protected from the natural elements and are characterised by utter poverty. The people have raised mud quays called 'bunds' to protect them from the saline tidal rivers and to hold back their twice daily high tides. These islands are also referred to as those at 'the tiger's lair'. A large percentage of the working population in these islands have to depend on the forest risking their lives and it is estimated by forest officials of both countries that around 300 islanders in West Bengal and Bangladesh are killed each year by tigers and crocodiles (*Crocodylus porosus*) alone.

In these southern islands closest to the forest, the only modes of locomotion are mechanised or simple country boats. Most basic products like kerosene (which is widely used for lighting purposes as there is no electricity), cooking oil, bricks, cement, paddy, vegetables and fruit have to be brought from the city by boats. Land cannot be cultivated more than once a year due to lack of fresh water. The river water is salty and of no use for drinking or for irrigation. Also, bunds frequently break. This causes the river to engulf houses and cultivated land. There are practically no cottage or small-scale industries apart from the ones offered by the few non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that have the means to do so. The principal economic activities are agriculture and fishing. Fishing is carried out both for prawn seed (largely by women) and for crab and river or sea fish (by men). Crab fishing is undertaken in the forest, prawn seed collection, however, is practiced mainly along the banks of the river islands.

So the Sundarbans are not just a 'beautiful garden' as the tourist literature portrays it to be but also an underdeveloped place where up until now there has been very little investment. Development programmes such as strengthening embankments and river bunds, road building or installing electricity have not been undertaken on the grounds that the peculiar geography of the area is not conducive to such projects. Basing their arguments on the conclusions of scientists who all through the 1980s and 1990s were of the opinion that these islands should never have been reclaimed in the first place and that strengthening the existing bunds will only cause greater environmental degradation, the authorities have often neglected funding public works. The urban media too has been of the opinion that by leaving these islands underdeveloped the Sundarbans inhabitants will be encouraged to seek refuge elsewhere. Even people deeply committed to working for the welfare of the poorest of the area believe that they are fighting a losing battle and that the Sundarbans is best 'returned to tigers'².

SUNDARBANS IMAGES: WHEN FICTION REDESIGNS FACTS

First perceived as a repulsive place by travellers, then as a 'wasteland' by the British colonialists—who nonetheless lost no time transforming the place into

a revenue-generating one—the Sundarbans have often been portrayed in ways which suited those in power. In 1875, Hunter, as pointed out by Greenough (1998: 240), devoted an entire book on the Sundarbans where after writing at great length about the forest and wild animals he only mentions in passing the people, referring to them as a ‘few wandering tribes’ and classifying them after long lists of wild animals and plants (1875: 317). Present-day studies on the Sundarbans follow a similar lopsided dichotomy: fascination, on the one hand, for the natural aspects of the Sundarbans, but on the other, an unsettling silence on the social and human facet of the region.

After the partition of India in 1947, eastern Bengal became part of East Pakistan and western Bengal the Indian state of West Bengal. In the wake of the Partition, millions of refugees crossed the border between the eastern and western parts of Bengal. The poorest refugees from eastern Bengal were sent to various camps such as Dandakaranya and Mana in central India where they shared no common language or culture with the local population. The Communists who were then in opposition promised to house them in West Bengal, suggesting it might be in the Sundarbans, if and when they came to power. When they did come to power in 1978, 30,000 east Bengali refugees sailed to the Sundarbans island of Morichjhanpi.

This island was not forested—it had been reclaimed for tamarisk and coconut plantation by the Government. So the refugees decided to settle on it. But soon the island was encircled, the refugees were fired at, their houses were burned down, and they were packed into lorries and taken back to the camps. The Sundarbans islanders, witness to this brutal eviction, often referred to this episode as ‘the massacre of Morichjhanpi’; it marked for them the beginning of a politics of betrayal by what they saw as a government run by the urban elite. How the government had put all its importance on the protection of wildlife and its subsequent use of force against these poor refugees which resulted in hundreds of them dying, was seen by the Sundarbans islanders as a betrayal not only of the poor and marginalised in general, but also, of Bengali *nimnobarno* identity³.

The ease and brutality with which the government wiped off all signs of the bustling life which had been going on there during 18 months was proof for the islanders that they were considered completely irrelevant to the more influential urban Bengali community, especially when weighed against tigers. In 2 weeks’ time, all the plots had been destroyed and the refugees ‘packed’ off. ‘Were we vermin that our shacks had to be burned down?’ rhetorically asked one of the islanders. The refugees were forcefully put in launches and sent to Hasnabad where lorries carried them back to Dandakaranya. Many of the islanders who had been rounded up along with the refugees, now fled, often with some of their newfound refugee companions from the lorries taking them back to Dandakaranya and returned to the Sundarbans. They came back to their former islands and settled along the embankments. Many others built

shacks along railway lines or in places like Barasat, Gobordanga or Bon-gaon—in West Bengal.

The Morichjhanpi massacre was considered a double betrayal by the Sundarbans islanders and they argued that it was because they had been considered as lesser mortals situated at the periphery and marginalised due to their social inferiority by the *bhadralok*⁴—by which I mean the anglicised, well-connected, educated, moneyed, essentially Hindu upper caste, and mainly urban, Bengalis—that tigers, taking the cue, had started feeding on them⁵ (see Jalais 2005). So for them, at the same time as the tiger's image was gaining prominence and was being used to frame moral and ethical debates around the issue of wildlife parks by various trans-national animal-based charities and development agencies like the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) or the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in bids to obtain funding, the very animal was turning into an alien. The islanders now started to see the state's investment in tourism and wildlife sanctuaries as instituting an unequal distribution of resources between them and wild animals. Correspondingly, tigers became 'tourist tigers' and moved onto the other side of the overarching status division and were therefore no longer protected by the islanders but started being attacked when they ventured into villages.

The Sundarbans islanders argued that tigers had become man-eaters after the violent events of Morichjhanpi because of two factors. One was the defiling of the Sundarbans forest due to mindless unleashing of government violence, the second was because of the stress which had been put thereafter by the government on the superiority of tigers in relation to the inhabitants of the Sundarbans. The brutality and rhetoric with which the refugees had been chased away, coupled with the measures for safeguarding tigers which the government had started to launch soon after the events of Morichjhanpi, had, explained the Sundarbans islanders, gradually made tigers self-important. With their now increased conviction of their self-worth, tigers had grown to see poorer people as 'tiger-food'.

The anthropomorphisation of tigers in relation to the Morichjhanpi massacre intrigued me. The essence of one's *bhadra* identity is often revealed through one's romanticised vision of nature, in this case of the Sundarbans—which literally means 'beautiful forest'—and of wildlife—here of the Royal Bengal tiger. *Bhadralok* sensitivity to the Royal Bengal tiger with its association to both the regal and the colonial images of hunting as well as to its current position as national animal has often been deployed to mark the urgency of having the Sundarbans become a World Heritage Site and prime tiger area. But the anthropomorphisation of tigers into that of the *bhadra* symbol of national animal was questioned by the islanders through their presentation of another image of the tiger. Shrugging off the colonial and national drape off this *bhadra* tiger, it portrayed the animal as one which had seen its gentle in-offensive nature irretrievably transformed into that of a man-eater by the

bloody events of Morichjhanpi. Highlighting and deploring this transformation of *their* tiger was a way, for the villagers, of reclaiming the forgotten pages of a history, which had relegated them to oblivion, an injustice they felt they had been done by the urbanised elite who believed tigers were more precious than them, the *nimnobarner* or *nimnobarger lok*.

In 2000, when the West Bengal government proposed setting up a nuclear power plant in the island of Jharkhali in South 24-Parganas the islanders felt betrayed all over again. Jharkhali is one of the southern islands of the Sundarbans and the reason given for setting up a power plant there was that it would help develop this poverty-ridden area (*The Statesman*, 10/7/2000). What appears ironical is that the very government which evicted the East Bengali refugees from Morichjhanpi on the grounds of protecting the forest now seemed ready to install a power plant and risk of blowing up the unique ecology of the Sundarbans (Mukhopadhyay 2003: 4). After local anti-nuclear campaigns the government finally postponed the project.

'All this while, the region was considered to be a World Heritage Site with an ecology so vulnerable that the government was reticent to let refugees settle here or even repair broken embankments, isn't it strange that the area now becomes a suitable place for the establishment of a nuclear power plant or the Sahara Group's plans to build a modern tourism blockbuster' remarked Abani, one of the islanders. The argument that their region can be a dream tourist spot amidst not only the dire poverty, but also the hazards the region's geography, seemed insane to the villagers.

WHOSE WORLD HERITAGE SITE?

How can we talk of or represent the Sundarbans without taking into account its people and their understandings of the place? As argued by Saberwal and Rangarajan, a failure to provide people with a stake in conservation will simply result in an alienation of these communities, an alienation that has in the past resulted in an active undermining of state-initiated conservation policies (2003: 2). What the Sundarbans islanders point out is that they are willing to protect the forest—which for many is their main source of livelihood—but that the government too should be showing some concern to protect them by investing in the region so that they will not have to work in the dangerous forests of the Sundarbans.

For any one society, and specifically here in the case of the Sundarbans, the animal or natural 'world' is not an indivisible category but has an historically constituted and morally loaded field of meanings that derive from the human habit of extending/imposing social logics, complexities and conflicts onto the natural world, and particularly onto animals other than ourselves (Franklin 1999). The portrayal of the region as a 'beautiful garden' is closely linked to urban idea of nature and wildlife. As argued by Macnaghten and Urry, be-

cause ideas of nature both have been, and currently are, fundamentally intertwined with dominant ideas of society, we need to address what ideas of society and of its ordering become reproduced, legitimated, excluded, validated and so on, through appeals to nature or the natural (1998: 15). This urban image, feel the villagers, unjustly silences their legitimate demand for a more equal allocation of resources between them and the surrounding wildlife.

This is why one needs to draw the links between administrative classifications and discourses and images on nature and science. Over the last two decades, 'natural' science studies in India have accented the link between the process of imperialism and techno-scientific development (Kumar 1991: 6; Worboys 1991: 13–15; Arnold & Guha 1996; Sangwan 1998). The usual literature on the Sundarbans focuses principally on metaphorical transformations, i.e. how, from being a 'waste' or 'drowned' land under early colonial administrators, it has metamorphosed into 'a beautiful and exotic garden' culminating in a 'World Heritage Site'. This is not so much the history of the Sundarbans' 'nature' as it is of its portrayal by the authorities that govern it. What is not addressed in relation to this picture is the fate of those who live in both the Bangladesh and the West Bengal Sundarbans.

The location of the history of the Sundarbans within the frameworks of influence of successive polities is important. What the islanders contemplate with increasing hostility is that the redistribution of wealth from such projects never reach them partly because the government's Sundarbans images' positive outlook rests on their absence from such an image. They argue that while the world is becoming a global village where people all over the world are increasingly brought to relate to the tigers of Sundarbans forests, their villages are shrinking, their very presences seen as illegitimate or even criminal in what has become a World Heritage Site.

Notes

1. Following common practice, when referring to the forest the plural will be used and when the region, the singular; *jangol* means 'forest', or 'jungle' and *abad* the reclaimed Sundarbans islands.
2. Even Pannalal Dasgupta (pers. comm. May 1996), a highly esteemed leftist activist turned Gandhian, who devoted most of his life towards improving the conditions of the poor, voiced such ideas.
3. *Nimnobarno* literally means 'inferior varna' or caste. It denotes those belonging to occupational castes considered inferior such as leather workers, those who deal in liquor, boatmen, fishermen, i.e. those classified as 'Untouchables' in British Bengal. Though Joya Chatterji in her seminal book *Bengal Divided*, 1994, refers to them as *chhotolok*—literally 'small people', I refrain from using it as it is a derogatory term commonly used as an abuse. *Nimnobarno* is interchangeable with *nimnobargo*.
4. The term *bhadralok* (gentle folk) is widely used and well understood in Bengal. It refers to the rentier class who enjoyed tenurial rights to rents from land appropriated by the Permanent Settlement. This was a class that did not work its land but lived off the rental income generated. Shunning manual labour the 'Babu' saw this as the essence of the social distance

between himself and his social inferiors. The title 'Babu'—a badge of *bhadralok* status—carried with it connotations of Hindu, frequently upper caste exclusiveness, of landed wealth, of being master (as opposed to servant), and latterly of possessing the goods of education, culture and anglicisation (Chatterji 1994: 5).

5. This however, is not seen as being the only reason why Sundarbans tigers have turned man-eaters. Among the other reasons mentioned were the harsh geography, a supposed long and difficult history of migration, and the more recent governmental experiments to help thwart what is seen as their unnatural taste for human flesh (details in Jalais, PhD thesis, University of London, 2004).

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