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Progress of the political scenario of Sundarban (India) from pre-independence era up to twenty first century

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Abstract

The largest delta of the world, Sundarban is enlisted as UNESCO World Heritage Site, which is politically divided between two neighbouring country named India and Bangladesh. Based on the international partition, about 60 percent part of this 10,000 km² (approximately) forest area belongs to Bangladesh and 40 percent to India under the state of West Bengal. This highly productive Mangrove contains diverse ecosystems which provides a wide range of direct ecosystem services to inhabitants as well as makes an effective role in the international economy and polity. However, this condition of the Sundarbans did not develop overnight, large tracts of the Sundarbans were cleared, drained and reclaimed for administrative and social development during the British colonial era. From that period to till date the transformation of Sundarbans has been tried to observe through this research paper.

Keywords: Indian Sundarban, pre-independence era, current scenario, administrative background, international polity

Introduction

Sundarban; the name itself carries a unique meaning. In the Bengali, the word 'Sundar' means 'quite pretty' and 'Ban' is described as 'Forest'. Sundarban, the only mangrove where the mystery and the uncertainty feel proud for its versatile nature. It is a land where life and death are like a game, where people and wild animals co-exist with nature. The southwards flow of the Ganges, Meghna and the Brahmaputra have been carrying the silt of that civilization for the last hundred years ^[1]. It is estimated that people started living in this confluence of salty-sweet water from the eighteenth century where the water is slightly brackish and becomes quite fresh during the rainy season when the freshwater plumes from the above-mentioned rivers push the intruding salt water out and bring a deposit of silt.

At the time of beginning the main motive of Sundarban civilization was the formation of cultivable land by clearing the forest ^[2]. By analysing the history or the historical and ethnographical background of Bengal it come to know that the people who arrived first at the undivided Bengal were mainly Puran, Ganju, and Mahato communities. They were basically from the state of Odisha and Jharkhand. The majority of those tribes were Mahishya. Although lastly, the indigenous people has begun to live in this area slowly and permanently as a group for the same reason. The introduction of the land system was an initiative of Mughals in the Middle Ages of Indian history but the modernization of the land system was brought under the direct control of the state at the beginning of the British rule ^[3]. The beginning of modern administrative system in the undivided Indian subcontinent had been started from the second half of nineteenth century. This journey was originally initiated by the British India govt. whose main objective was to initiate the tax system. This practice was regional-centric, that means there were two kinds of tax collection process; one for the presidency cities and another for rural areas. Since the whole country was mainly based on village cultured at that time, this is why the tax collection system was almost the same all over the India. However, the regulations of tax system case for the Sundarbans were totally irrelevant. Because so far Sundarban was thinly populated, so administrative complexity for this region has not reached so easily ^[4].

Literature Review

The context and aim of this research paper are mainly an attempt to analyses the previous

and present scenario of political situation of Sundarbans which is under the jurisdiction of Govt. of India. A very few researchers have done their research work on close to this subject like the impact of political issues on the environmental conservation, contemporary situation of politics, social equality, popular sovereignty and etc. all of which are related to Indian Sundarban. In a research article researcher Jayashree Vivekanandan mentioned about the conservation politics in a trans boundary protected area of Sundarban [5]. This article is based on the entire Sundarban which is shared by two South Asian democratic country named Bangladesh and India. Through this paper author stated about international political scenario for example sovereignty practices, social equality, cultural politics of conservation, popular sovereignty, the politics of conservation like waterlogged wealth and etc. Other than that, it is also mentioned that how issues of resource access and governance are framed, negotiated, and addressed.

Author Amrita Sen write down in her research paper on the economic and socio-cultural vulnerability of a forest-dependent community who is the inhabitant of the Satjelia Island in Sundarban [6]. Author mainly done her research study based on PA management (Protected Area). The main research area of this paper is to find out a) the main difference between indigenous people and 'other' marginalized communities which has done on collective political rights, cultural heritage and livelihood options b) the traditional conservation norms and c) the impact of forest department's restriction on non-indigenous community.'

In another research paper researcher Amrita Sen and Sarmistha Pattanaik stated about the egalitarian transformation of socio ecological relations within the 'non-indigenous' community, political boundary of Indian Sundarban along with the map of an important block of Sundarban named Gosaba [7]. According to the authors, this article is based on the field of political ecology and alternative socio-ecological relations which is refers as 'core philosophical concern for social and environmental justice' (Walker).

An ex-Indian Administrative Service officer and former Chief Secretary of State for the Government of West Bengal named Alapan Bandyopadhyay has written an article named 'Sundarbaner Prashashonik Itihash' (Administrative History of the Sundarbans). He mentioned in his article that the arrival of administrative civilization in this mangrove region had created when Henkel came to the Sundarbans from Jessore. Author Bandyopadhyay also mentioned here that according to the historian Satish Chandra's documents the first administrative model of Sundarban was made in the year of 1875. At that time extensive land survey was done, 75000 bighas of land were distributed, 144 talukas were created on the basis of which tax system was formed. The disaster management system of Sundarban has been started around ever since.

Objective, Methodology and Data Collection

- To examine the political landscape of Sundarbans during the pre-independence era, focusing on colonial rule, administrative structures, and indigenous governance systems.
- To analyse the impact of independence and post-colonial governance on the political dynamics of Sundarbans, including the implementation of land reforms, administrative reforms, and decentralization

efforts.

The main objective of this research paper is to discuss about the governmental regularity of Sundarban. Here the authors are tired to emphasize on the gradual evaluation of Sundarban during the pre-independence era to the 21st century.

The paper is mainly based on secondary information and data which they have modified according to data availability through qualitative analysis. Multiple administrative data of Govt. of India, reports, various research article, survey, summery report, maps and last but not the least different types of books on Sundarban is the main information source of researchers.

Political and Administrative Background of Sundarban

Besides Rabindranath Tagore, 1971 liberation war, Rampal Power Plant, Bengal culture; the Sundarbans is one of those important topics on which India and Bangladesh is co-related with each other. Although this Badaban have been tried to develop for a long time before the division made between the two countries. Ever since the Sundarbans tried to become part of the civilized administrative settlement system, or it is better to say that since time immemorial attempts have been made to bring Sundarbans into the structured political system. The theory of depopulation about Sundarbans shows that in the middle Ages various kinds of reasons like range from earthquakes led to a sudden subsidence of this land, other than those attacks which was carried out by Portuguese and Arakans, and a hostile environment were the main reasons for the low population density [8]. However, irrespective of debates on the timing of settlements, human habitation was tried to start through the clearing of the forest in low-lying tracts. However, it might be mentioned here that the new residents were migratory in nature, using the land only seasonally for cultivation.

In the 19th century, Sundarbans had been started to develop gradually from Jessore district, which is now the part of Bangladesh. From Satish Chandra Mitra's 'History of Jessore-Khulna' it can be known that the administrative effort brings the Sundarbans to the forefront of logic, pattani, lease, civilization, and progress. For the first time in 1771, British collector general Clod Russell initiated a plan to divide the total Sundarbans area into different plots and to lease them out to prospective landlords for timber extraction and the collection of revenues. These lease-holding landowners encouraged poor farming communities (Mostly tribal community) from other parts of Bengal as well as from neighbouring states of undivided India to come and settle in the Sundarbans. It can be mentioned here that this exercise initiated in 1781 by district collector Tillman Henkel. He first entered the largest mangrove in the decades of 1780s to establish a modern Sundarbans and an administrative base. About the plan of Henkel, Satish Chandra further said that in that era, the infestation of pirates from the eastern part (Now Bangladesh) to Calcutta by river was more frequent. And the beginning of the journey of civilized Sundarbans by protecting the Sundarbans from that and turning the region into cultivable land. The new regulation, enacted on 26 April 1818 which was decided to appoint a commissioner for the entire Sundarbans and on July 5 of that year, Mr. Scott was appointed as the first commissioner of that region. However, after this period, many new changes took place in the board of administration. In 1836, the then Sundarbans

Commissioner, Shakespeare, proposed that the Sundarbans Commission should be abolished and its work distributed among the districts ^[9]. According to this proposal the commission was really lifted in 1844 after relieving pressure from various quarters. Since then, various initiatives related to the Sundarbans had been taken at different times, though any of that have not been so successful. But the last and most important decision of the British government in 1875 was the Sundarbans-centric one that was before leaving the land the government dug up several large water bodies, surrounded by a sixteen-and-a-half-foot-high embankment which became a shelter for people even today during natural disasters. It can be considered as the first administrative model to prevent the Sundarbans disaster ^[10].

Political relation between India and Bangladesh based on Sundarban conservation

The entire Sundarbans has taken the place in the World Heritage Convention's list for its tremendous universal value. It (WHC) is in the apex of the pyramidal structure that arrays subnational sites, national systems, and sub-regional and regional networks along with other international sites in an increasing order of international recognition. However, an administrative and political mind set to ecological concerns in India and Bangladesh has informed much of conservation efforts in the Sundarbans.

This Eco region is increasingly threatened by climate-induced hazards (e.g., rising sea levels, increasing storms, and salinity), and mounting anthropogenic pressure due to rising population and economic development. After recognising various threats, Bangladesh and India signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the Conservation of the Sundarban in September 2011. Since then, significant progress has been created in joint assessment of the status of tigers. Although before this time period an action plan titled, The Bangladesh Tiger Action Plan (2009–2017) mentioned that tiger conservation has to be synchronized with both Bangladesh's own national development plans and India's protection strategy through trans boundary initiatives ^[11]. India too, in recognizing that “the entire Sundarbans region is one ecosystem” had mooted the idea of a joint initiative, the Indo-Bangladesh Sundarbans Ecosystem Forum in 2011 ^[12]. The mandate of the proposed forum, to preserve the shared heritage of the Sundarbans, was to be affected not only by the two governments but also by local communities and civil society actors active in the area. However, joint action within the sort of process the region for operationalizing the MoU, developing a standard and shared understanding of the impacts of global climate change, and addressing problems with keep of the ecosystem-dependent population, amongst others, have seen very little to no action. Given the celerity of adverse amendment and also the scale of challenges facing the region, this inaction is inexcusable. The 50th year of India–Bangladesh diplomatic relations is an opportune moment to revisit the MoU and reinvigorate joint action that is scale– and time–commensurate. In a report which was published by the Govt. of India (2020) acknowledged that, “It is important that this trans boundary tiger population is managed as a single population. Despite efforts by forest departments of each countries, joint patrolling and joint management activities have nevertheless to commence” ^[13]. In Sundarban issue, the local NGOs (Both country) have been instrumental in bringing losses caused by human-wildlife conflicts to the attention of the Forest Department

so that the requisite compensation can be provided to the bereaved families ^[14]. Here we can mention that one of the experiments with Bangladesh's community radio are indicative of new spaces opening up for development agencies. The initiative, functioning as an early warning system in cyclone and flood prone areas, offers advanced takeaways for the Indian district administration to work with. Vivekanandan show in her study that West Bengal is the first state to initiate one of the earliest experiments in multilevel governance of natural resource management in India. The successful regeneration of forest cover that followed prompted the central government to launch the Joint Forest Management program (JFM) in 1990 modelled on West Bengal's participatory forestry model. In the last two decades of its existence, JFM-run forests have come to contain over one-third of the total forest. A significant footstep toward identifying the significance of local people in natural resource management is the project of compiling biodiversity registers under taken by the Indian state ^[15]. Mandated by the National Biodiversity Act in 2002, the documentation is aimed at bringing indigenous knowledge systems within the fold in ways that address deficiencies in the existing body of scientific knowledge. With much of this traditional perception remaining undocumented, the exercise acknowledges communities as the repositories of facts and their engagement with the environment at a granular level. As with social and development theory, conservation theory too has come back to acknowledge that the complexities of ecosystem management necessitate local people participation. The assertion by native leaders from across Latin America in 2007 that “indigenous peoples do not live within Protected Areas. Protected Areas are within indigenous territories was a mandate for recognition and a declaration of indigenous sovereignty ^[16, 17].”

Discussions

In the last two and a half centuries, the importance of the Sundarbans extends from the local to the global. The ecosystem has been affected by human impact, which is slowly an important reason of climatic changes and extreme global weather warming. Human activities in the inhabited part of the Indian Sundarbans have a greater incremental impact on mangrove forests, salinity increase, relative mean sea level rise and land loss than previously assumed. Protection of mangrove forests is extremely complex and multi scale because of the interaction of climatic threats, path-dependent development regimes and environmental governance ^[18].

In recent years, the West Bengal government has taken some steps to address the Sundarbans' challenges. In 2017, the state government released a climate change action plan, acknowledging the threat of rising sea levels and coastal erosion. However, critics argue that the implementation of these policies has been inadequate, and the region continues to face the devastating impacts of climate change. The political response to the Sundarbans' plight has also been criticized for a lack of cohesive and comprehensive approaches. The central and state governments have often been at odds, with political infighting and a lack of coordination hampering effective solutions. Despite these challenges, there are signs of progress. The Indian government has recognized the need for climate-induced loss and damage compensation, and the Sundarbans is set to benefit from the Loss and Damage fund agreed upon at the COP28 summit. Additionally, there is growing recognition

of the importance of nature-based solutions, such as large-scale mangrove plantation, to address the region's environmental challenges. In conclusion, the political scenario in the Sundarbans has evolved from a period of neglect and exploitation in the pre-independence era to a more complex landscape today, marked by both progress and persistent challenges. Addressing the region's multifaceted issues will require a coordinated, inclusive, and long-term approach from all stakeholders.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise.

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