

Leaving No One Behind The Tiger Widows - Forgotten women of Sundarbans

Ashok Kumar Nayak¹

“Life is so cruel when I lost my husband due to tiger attack; there are tiring struggles since that day. I am putting all efforts to educate my child so that they would lead a life with dignity, I do not need sympathy to need support for a life with dignity”

K.M., Dayapur Village, (Sundarbans) West Bengal, India.

“My husband was killed by a tiger while collecting honey in Sundarbans forest for our livelihoods. I have three children to take care, I have not got any compensation or social security coverage. The situation continues to more [sic] difficult due to COVID and Amphan cyclone in May 2020.”

E.H, Dakhin Durgapur, Kultali, (Sundarbans) West Bengal, India.

I. Background

The human-animal conflict has been a regular occurrence for the small traditional indigenous community living in Sundarbans in West Bengal, India. The tiger in the forests and crocodiles in the waters have been life-threatening options to the poor forest-dependent human inhabitants on the fringes of the Sundarbans. People enter the waters and forests to maintain their basic livelihood. This includes activities such as fishing, catching crab, collecting honey and firewood gathering. As a result, some of them become victims of tiger attacks in these forests.

The Sundarbans is the world’s largest mangrove forest delta, formed by the rivers Ganga, Brahmaputra and Meghna.² The Sundarbans covers an area of about 10,000 km², of which forests in Bangladesh's Khulna Division extend over 6,017 km², and in India’s West Bengal, they extend over 4,260 km across the South 24 Parganas and North 24 Parganas districts. It is an ecologically fragile and climatically vulnerable region that is home to over 4.5 million

¹ The author is a development professional based in Kolkata, India, ashoknayak802@gmail.com

² UNESCO, “The Sundarbans”

[https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/798/#:~:text=The%20Sundarbans%20Reserve%20Forest%20\(SRF,mangrove%20forest%20in%20the%20world.](https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/798/#:~:text=The%20Sundarbans%20Reserve%20Forest%20(SRF,mangrove%20forest%20in%20the%20world.)

people.³ The most abundant tree species are Sundari (*Heritiera fomes*) and gewa (*Excoecaria agallocha*). The forests provide habitat to hundreds of faunal wildlife.. The area is known for the Bengal tiger, and other threatened species such as the estuarine crocodile and the Indian python. As per the West Bengal state, the area is inhabited predominantly by Scheduled Caste & Scheduled Tribe (Dalit and Indigenous community) population; the terrain is very inhospitable and inaccessible; the communication is difficult and life is very hard.⁴ The Scheduled Caste (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) are officially designated groups of people in India. The terms are recognised in the Constitution of India and the groups were known as the “Depressed Classes.” Millions of people depend on the Sundarbans ecosystem for their livelihood and sustenance through fishing, collection of crab, honey, and fuel wood/timber.

There is a huge environmental and ecological importance of Sundarbans. Sundarbans has an extremely rich diversity of aquatic and terrestrial flora and fauna. The Sundarbans’ highly productive ecosystem acts as a natural fish nursery. The Sundarban Mangrove reduces the fury of cyclonic storms and prevents erosion due to tidal action. Sadly, the mangrove forests are under threat. Land erosion is taking place due to coastal development and climate change.⁵

The Sundarban Biosphere Reserve (SBR) was constituted by the Government of India (GOI) in 1989 and it received the recognition of UNESCO under its Man and Biosphere (MAB) Programme in November 2001. Sundarban National Park, forming the core area of Sundarban Tiger Reserve (STR), received recognition as World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1987. It has been nominated by GOI for recognition as a Ramsar Site (a wetland of international importance). Sundarban Tiger Reserve was constituted by GOI under the Project Tiger scheme, in 1973. Sundarban is the only mangrove forest in the world that is the home of the Tiger. Sundarban Tiger Reserve has the highest tiger population in the world.⁶ The Indian side of SBR is 9,630 km², out of which forest cover is 4263 km² covering the core and the buffer area that is

³ World Wildlife Federation, “Sundarbans”

https://www.wwfindia.org/about_wwf/critical_regions/sundarbans3/about_sundarbans/#:~:text=The%20Sundarbans%20delta%20in%20India,to%20over%204.5%20million%20people.

⁴ Government of West Bengal, Department of Sundarban Affairs,

https://www.sundarbanaffairswb.in/home/page/about_us

⁵ Sahana Gordon, “Erosion, an important cause of mangrove loss in the Sundarbans” Monabay, May 28, 2020,

<https://india.mongabay.com/2020/05/erosion-an-important-cause-of-mangrove-loss-in-the-sundarbans/>

⁶ https://www.sundarbanaffairswb.in/home/page/sundarban_biosphere

completely uninhabited. The rest, 5367 km², of the SBR is the transition zone which is densely populated. The STR, which was notified under the Project Tiger scheme of the government of India, has an area of about 2584.89 km², out of which 1699.62 km² is being designated as a Core area or the Critical Tiger Habitat (CTH), and buffer area, including wildlife sanctuary, is 522.98 km², so the livelihood activities are officially permitted in 522.98 km².⁷ This means the livelihood rights of forest-dependent people were grossly restricted/denied well before the Forest Rights Act came into place in the year 2006. Over the last three decades, expansion of the core area (by 28 percent), and notification of a part of the buffer area as a wildlife sanctuary, shrunk the area available for fishing (both land and water) from 892.38 square km to roughly 523 square km.⁸

Given the geographic importance of the area to all the inhabitants in the area, it is natural that as development and climate change continue, that both humans and wildlife will inevitably come into conflict as they look for and share resources. There are many examples of this conflict that continually occur and in some cases the end of the story is sad and gruesome for both wildlife and humans. In April 2021, a group of honey gatherers were out when a tiger attacked them. The honey gatherers come from April to June in rotations for a week in the SBR.⁹ In one case, the son was able to free himself from the tiger attack because his father was there to save him. In another case that same week a man died from a tiger attack.¹⁰

Around 2017 Parul Haldar lost her husband to a tiger when he was dragged deep into the SBR when he went to go find food. Haldar is a single mother of four and depends on the SBR to provide security to her family.¹¹

This article discusses the challenges of the Tiger Widow. Locally called Bagh-Bidhobas (Tiger Widows), the term refers to the widow whose husband has been killed due to a tiger attack while

⁷https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323856962_The_political_agenda_of_implementing_Forest_Rights_Act_2006_evidences_from_Indian_Sundarban

⁸ <https://www.boblme.org/documentRepository/BOBLME-2013-Socioec-03.pdf>

⁹ Md Abdullah Al Hossain, "Father saves son from a Royal Bengal Tiger in Sundarbans," English, April 15, 2021, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/father-saves-son-from-a-royal-bengal-tiger-in-sundarbans>

¹⁰ Dhaka Tribune, "Honey Collector dies in tiger attack" April 14, 2021, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2021/04/14/honey-collector-injured-in-tiger-attack>

¹¹ Al Jazeera, "Pushed deep into Sunderbans, these Indians brave tigers, storms" January 14, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/1/14/pushed-deep-into-sundarbans-these-indians-brave-tigers-storms>

fishing, catching crab and collecting honey for their sustenance. The narratives in this document are about the West Bengal Indian side of Sundarbans.

II. The Issue

The swampy tidal mangrove tiger land has given rise to a unique and on-going social problem not experienced elsewhere on the globe – that of thousands of women widowed by tiger attacks over the years. These women suffer a good deal of mental trauma due to the sudden deaths of their husbands, more often the women do not get a chance to see the mortal remains of their loved ones. Due to the gender constructions of the society, widows are the most deprived, excluded and vulnerable members of the community. There are social restrictions that are placed upon them and on their activities. The widows remain in low status; a widow is looked upon as a burden by the entire family and is forced to lead a life of the recluse. Strict social customs and rituals are imposed upon them so that they have to abstain from participating in certain socio-religious functions, they abstain from wearing jewels, to dressing in certain colours and pattern, having certain food. Widowhood is painful, unfavourable, and humiliating for women.

In the case of tiger widows, the situation is much *more* stigmatized; the fellow community consider these women as ‘misfortune’. They face multilayers of discrimination and exclusion due to their status of widowhoods and sudden killing of their husband. They are subject to the victimhood of patriarchal customs, religious norms, and widespread discrimination. The tiger widow faces social stigma, and post-traumatic stress disorder, largely due to the changed behaviour of their fellow community, and uncertainty and anxiety about their future. Immediate sustenance turns out to be the major issue immediately after losing the earning family member. Being sustained in the initial days of shock and instability is most critical, and calls for primary assistance to the families. Almost all of them struggle to manage the basic survival needs such as livelihoods, income, food, shelter, health, and education for their small child; they are constrained to exercise their rights as a human.

Bureaucratic hassles to access social Protection

Legal and administrative procedures with bureaucratic apathy constitute the next layer of helplessness when the widow looks for accessing basic social protection (provisioned compensation for death in animal attack/accident in the forest or river). The entire process is

complicated, with many documents to submit and much running from post to pillar. Some of the basic requirements are a boat license certificate (BLC) and a permit from the Forest Department for venturing the forest, the police record and post-mortem report, death certificate, and all these documents are from different departments and authorities. In many incidents, the woman may even be misled or might be unaware of the process. These legal and administrative processes are a must for a claim under the provisioned social safety nets of the state. The poor fishers, honey collectors, and crab collectors sometimes might venture into the prohibited waters and forest with or without a license, or sometime without realizing that they are venturing into restricted areas. If the tiger attack occurs on those journeys, many do not report the incident in fear of legal proceedings against them. Even if they report, legal records are generally complex. The poor family members have to run from pillar to post. Mostly the widow and close family members are illiterate and ignorant of the procedures and lack the resources to get the required documents and complete the process; generally, they succumb to despair and cannot pursue their claims. All of these account for almost no realization of compensation or insurance claims; a study in the year 2018 found 94.5 percent of human-animal conflict cases took place in and around the reserve forest during livelihood activities¹². But as per the respondent of study, villagers believe the numbers are higher and not recorded because many of these fatalities happen in out-of-bound areas inside the reserve and are not reported to authorities.

Since 1994, the West Bengal state has a separate department called the Department of Sundarbans Affairs. And the Sundarbans Development Board was created in 1973. The focus of this department is on coordinating development schemes and projects in the area, providing infrastructural facilities, rural communication, water resources, preservation of ecological balance, improvements in livelihoods, and promoting social, economic, and cultural advancement. But nowhere in the public policy is the of these tiger widows mentioned. There is no specific social protection so far designed for these vulnerable widows. However, the West Bengal State Government has initiated the Widow Pension Scheme to provide financial assistance for widows of the state. The scheme provides eligible widows with monthly pensions, under specific criteria and documentary requirements. The Government of India introduced the

¹² <https://india.mongabay.com/2018/12/tiger-widows-of-sundarbans-navigating-ecology-beliefs-and-mental-health/>

National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP) as a part of its journey for universalization of minimum social protection to a deserving targeted population of the country in 1995. NSAP was expanded in 2009 to cover more vulnerable groups below the poverty line. In February 2009, the Government of India approved pensions to widows below the poverty line.

Issues around operationalization of FRA in Sundarbans

The Forest Rights Act, 2006 (FRA), is an iconic forest law in India. This Act recognizes the rights of forest-dependent communities to ensure livelihood and food security of the forest-dwelling Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers. The FRA also strengthens the conservation of the forests by including the responsibilities and authority on Forest Rights holders for sustainable use, conservation of biodiversity, and maintenance of ecological balance. The act has been progressive to overcome the global dilemma/conflict between development and conservation principles – it places the principle of conservation with development and participation of the forest-dependent and indigenous community. But due to complex technical contradictions between the FRA and Sundarban Biosphere Reserve, the FRA is still not operational in Sundarbans. The FRA has had a sporadic implementation in all the districts of West Bengal (WB) itself, so it is not surprising that the FRA has not yet been implemented in Sundarban, the biosphere reserve that houses a majority of the forest-dependent people in the lower island villages bordering the forests. Some definitional contradictions within the Act also include a range of local political dynamics and dominant power relations which influence the implementation of FRA in Sundarbans. For example, the FRA entitles individual and community land rights to ‘primarily those who reside in the forest and who depend on the forest or forest lands for bona fide livelihoods needs’. In Sundarbans, dependence on forest in terms of fishing, honey collection, and all other types of forest-related occupations, is done through regular forest visits, since there are no forest villages and no village or human habitation is located inside the forests. All the villages are revenue villages, so there is no issue with regards to the implementation of FRA in the Sundarbans. Since there is no human habitation in the forest, people should not get individual and common land in occupation as per the provision of the FRA, as forest land does not include ‘revenue land or land outside the forest’. A large proportion of the population engages in fishing in rivers and creeks and it is not possible to do demarcation or entitle rights to a particular community on forest rivers and creeks.

One more contradiction is the formation of Forest Rights Committees (can be termed as forest village council, which is the functional committee for implementation of the FRA at village level), The Gram Sabha, under the Forest Rights Rules 2007, 'shall be convened by the Gram Panchayat of individual villages for formation and composition of FRC'. Whereas in Sundarban, each GP houses multiple revenue villages called Gram Sansads and thus convening a single Gram Sabha at the GP level would be a serious challenge¹³. Furthermore, the Gram Sabha would include a vast range of people not necessarily dependent on forests. Therefore, it is important to clear out whether the FRC would form at Gram Sansad or Gram Sabha level in Sundarbans. Another challenge in the functioning and governance of the FRC due to its nature of demographic composition (people who depend on the forest for their livelihoods and other people who do not depend on the forest for their livelihoods) and getting adequate representatives of the dependent community in the FRC. This is because the number of representatives will determine the decision-making process in functioning and ensuring the rights in the FRCs. The government has strategically ruled out the possibility of the forest workers of the lower islands of Sundarban, who primarily depend on the forests for livelihood, to be the beneficiaries of the Act.

III. Suitable Progressive Action

There is still no official data available on the total number of tiger widows in Sundarbans. But different media reports and NGOs working in the area mentioned the total number is likely to be around 3000, and tiger attacks have been increasing for the last couple of years. The land is shrinking due to the rise in the sea level because of climate change. This is leading to the tiger reserve area shrinking, making fishermen vulnerable. The data recorded in Volume-2 of the Animal Diversity, Natural History And Conservation of Forest Directorate of West Bengal, shows that 106 people were killed in 15 years from 1994-1995 to 2010-2011. But, in later years, there was a massive increase in the casualties. According to the data from the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change provided to the Lok Sabha on June 28 2019, 71 people

¹³https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323856962_The_political_agenda_of_implementing_Forest_Rights_Act_2006_evidences_from_Indian_Sundarban

have died due to tiger attacks in Sundarbans in just five years from 2014 to 2018¹⁴. The true number is definitely more, because many cases the accident cases are not reported. There are some obvious reasons that make forest-dependant people venture into forest knowingly or unknowingly:

- Depleting of fish resources due to reasons like commercial fishing, increased pollution of water resource, and fish and crabs no longer found at closer proximity, so people have to venture deeper into the forest.
- Second, the sea level and its related changes in Sundarbans are a serious threat to biodiversity. The Tsunami in the year 2005 led to salinity in the waters of the Western part of Sundarbans. In the past three decades, 20 per cent of the Royal Bengal Tiger's domain – the Sundarban Tiger Reserve area — has been submerged in water. From 1969 to 2009, 210/247 sq. km area has been swallowed up by the river.¹⁵

There is no separately allocated government scheme for tiger widows. They get no preference in accessing the existing government schemes for the poor. They are treated just as another poor family and have to compete in the queue despite these distinct vulnerabilities with additional layers of social stigma and deprivation in this difficult, remote corner of the world.

Many NGOs are working on the tiger widow issues. Many of these genuinely benevolent philanthropic initiatives are inadequate to match the requirements of the stark reality. These initiatives are targeted for providing some immediate basic survival needs and then support in regenerating the livelihoods of tiger widows. Furthermore, the NGO interventions are time-bound and fund-driven projects. There are also initiatives from NGOs like ActionAid and its allies to collectivize tiger widows by building their leadership, empowering them to advocate for themselves. These initiatives are then coupled with advocacy initiatives at local administrations and at the state level.

The State government also has income-generating activities through women's self-help groups, but these are neither large scale nor able to bring any visible, tangible changes to the life of the tiger widow. Recently in May 2021, the 3rd-time elected Government of West Bengal announced a basic income scheme for economically disadvantaged families of Bengal, while attempting to

¹⁴ <https://en.gaonconnection.com/the-vulnerable-fishermen-and-the-tiger-widows-of-sundarbans/>

¹⁵ <https://en.gaonconnection.com/the-vulnerable-fishermen-and-the-tiger-widows-of-sundarbans/>

make 15 million women, who are heads of their families, more financially stable. The scheme targets female heads of general category families who will be provided ₹500 monthly and SC, ST and families of other backward classes ₹1,000 per month. If this policy may provide a regular monthly cash transfer to this segment of women, it may be targeted to cover all tiger widows.

There is a critical need for the state to take cognizance of this issue of the local indigenous community, climate concerns, and the sustainable co-existence of the local community, wildlife, and regenerating local bio-diversity. This can only be possible if there will be stronger interdepartmental convergence with collective GO & NGO efforts.

Due to COVID 19 and the recurring natural disasters Amphan Cyclone in May 2020 and Yass Cyclone in May 2021 hit Sundarban, the community living in Sundarbans has been affected badly. Villages are over-flooded, houses are collapsed, agriculture fields and fish ponds have been indurated with saline water, and fishing equipment such as boats and nets have been lost. COVID-related lockdown and restriction further impacted local livelihood activities. The impacts of crises are never gender-neutral; generally suffering is more for women, specifically the widows, who are grappling with or poised to suffer the devastating consequences. Cyclone Amphan badly affected the lives of 13 million people, with approximate material damages amounting to 13 billion USD, according to government officials in a Reuters report.¹⁶ Similarly, after Yass Cyclone on 26th May 2021, around 10 million people were affected, 4,500 villages were damaged in West Bengal and losses were estimated to be around ₹20 thousand crore (US\$2.76 billion).

The economic crisis are major stressors, particularly in this fragile climatic zone facing the recurrence of natural disasters. The rehabilitation of these tiger widows is very critical for attaining Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). SDG goal no. 5, the global agenda, precisely targets gender equity. The SDG is emphasizing the importance of economic and environmental sustainability for peaceful and inclusive societies. The SDG target can be achieved with relentless efforts on gender-based discrimination. Gender inequality makes and keeps women

¹⁶ <https://news.trust.org/item/20200523092025-ecy5k/>

poor, depriving them of basic rights and opportunities for well-being. The discrimination in accessing social protection and economic opportunities leaves women less resilient to cope with adversities and pushes these women into the vicious cycle of poverty. These tiger widows are the first and immediate victim of the situation and fall into the trap of different vulnerabilities, as the majority of them are in low-paid informal jobs related to the fishery, agriculture, domestic work, home-based work, and petty businesses. This means they are less likely to have savings and abilities to make up for lost income in a situation like a pandemic or a cyclone. These women have minimal or even no education, and thereby no marketable skills, and are deprived of better economic opportunities. These widows also struggle with additional disadvantages of socio-cultural and political barriers including obstacles from society and their community, and even their own families.

Like others, tiger widows have a right to equal access to all avenues to end poverty, from social protection safety nets. Empowering tiger widows is a critical determinant in achieving the global call for leaving no one behind. It is extremely important from the local and national perspective to put efforts into meeting SDG targets, along with targeting the most deprived and vulnerable sections. Alongside many other targets, specifically recognizing women's equality and empowerment meets both the objective and is part of the solution. Goal 5 is known as the stand-alone gender goal; it is dedicated to achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. Fully realizing the rights of women will be key to achieving the first goal of SDG: ending poverty in all its forms everywhere. Tiger widows are the most vulnerable and live in particularly remote difficult geographical locations of the world. Any initiative for tiger widows in Sundarbans' eco-fragile zone will contribute to many other SDG goals, and specifically answer Goals No. 5, 1, 2, 10, 13, and 14.

At this juncture of the COVID pandemic and frequent natural disasters, creating economic opportunities and providing social protection can not only empower these women, but can provide a better life for their dependants, including children who are on the verge of the lost generation.

Suggested Actions

To begin, there should be a count of all tiger widows to identify the exact number and their socio-economic conditions, their family details, dependant children and aged persons in their families. This means that the social protection interventions can be targeted appropriately and coordination and convergence of existing social protection schemes from different departments can be synchronized towards the best possible ways to help. There should be a mechanism for time-bound single-window delivery of immediate compensation within the stipulated period of death of the earning members of the family. Operationalization of an individual family-based appropriate livelihoods re-generating program may be targeted with adequate provisioning under government flagship programmes like the rural livelihoods mission. Proposed intervention can be done under the leadership of the Sundarbans Development Board with support from non-governmental organizations. Appropriate NGOs may be engaged to collectivize and empower the tiger widows, to develop their leadership building and promote them to take care of their advocacy at their local level with local administrations and local self-governance. The NGOs may provide technical support to state agencies in order to frame and operationalize the targeted interventions. The entire program may be monitored by a state steering committee taking members from relevant departments and NGOs, and the State Women Commission may play role as chief advisor for periodical monitoring and review of the progress of work.

Advocacy on Tiger Issue:

Amidst COVID, the sixty-fifth session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women¹⁷ took place from 15 to 26 March 2021 in New York in a hybrid mode (physical meeting and virtual platform; these hybrid arrangements are because of COVID protocols). This is an annual event of UN; every year representatives of the Member States, United Nations entities, and non-governmental organizations in consultative status with ECOSOC attend this event. The UN commission is responsible for reviewing and appraising progress achieved towards gender equality and the empowerment of women. The Commission also contributes to the follow-up to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

¹⁷ The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), a functional commission of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), is a global policy-making body dedicated exclusively to promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women.

A group of NGOs working on the issue of widows across the world took this opportunity and on March 17th the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW65) event tried to draw the commission's attention to the issues of widows across the world; specifically, the advocacy points of this NGO network to bring the issue of these widows under the preview of CEDAW's review. Hopefully, consultative efforts of both State and non-state actors will be able to support widows so they can overcome the current stress and gain a better life with dignity.