

SOCIAL REJECTION OF TIGER-WIDOWS OF SUNDARBAN, INDIA

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ABSTRACT:

Human-tiger conflict is a recurrent problem in the Sundarbans Reserve Forest, India. It not only led to a heightened concern for noteworthy morbidity and mortality of the people living in this deltaic region as well as the man-eating tigers. both This study explores the uncanny fate of the widows whose husbands were pounced upon by tigers while going out fishing. The widows of tiger-attacked husbands have to bear with the indelible stigma commensurate with tiger-killing and sequential social rejection and intolerance. The present paper analyses how these social ostracisms led to the development of psychosocial problems of the widows.

KEYWORDS: Sundarbans; Tiger-widows; Social isolation; Mental health

Methods: The study was conducted in Satjelia block of Gosaba of Sundarbans by using both qualitative and quantitative methods. It included face-to face interview of the widows, village survey for tiger-widow and group discussions

I. INTRODUCTION

The Sundarbans is constantly passing through numerous trials and tribulations and these changes pose a relentless menace to the people in the deltaic regions. The area is equally shared by the famous man-eating tigers. The socio-economic situation in the landscape of the Sundarbans is characterized by the continuous changing of drivers of mangrove ecosystem. (Seidensticker and Hai 1983; Seidensticker 1987). The islanders of the Sundarbans tend to explain the geography of Sundarbans far more the natural peripheral of the Sundarbans environment. The study of Sundarbans shows how people's interactions with animals are not only rooted in their relation to the environment as a spectrum of reality but also as chronicles providing them opportunity to dwell on their ideas of the social anchoring. The focal point will be the people-tiger relation as a tool to understand both social relations in the WB Sundarbans, and to focus on how tigers have appropriated into urban literature as one of the most prominent trademarks of global conservation, as well as the absence of humans in the literature on the Sundarbans. Over the years the people of the Sundarbans have risked their lives to forage in the forest to gather forest produce and other resources and their livelihood and economic sustenance is totally hinged on their association with the forest. (Blair 1990; Tamang 1993; Rahman 2000; Miah et al., 2003; Islam and Wahab 2005). The gradual shrinkage of habitant and degradation of forest pose a relentless challenge to tigers in the way of restricting their expanse. The reckless severing of wood by the locals to cater to their needs and commercial demand is the most visible threat to the natural habitat in the Sundarbans. This kind of act has brought about the destruction of trees which, in turn, reduces the overall area of the habitant of the tigers. (Salam and Noguchi 1998; Blasco and Aizpura 2002; Iftekhar and Islam 2004a). Occasionally the coexistence of both human-beings and tigers creates the context in which tigers are attacked and killed as a measure of retribution. Sometimes while their expedition in the forest people are killed rendering the families to be landed in an abject of penury (Gani 2002). Hence, the conservation of tigers in the Sundarbans is a serious issue considering the economic sustainability and livelihood of the local people. The trespass of tigers on the human habitation along the periphery of the forest is a recurrent expedition that has led to huge economic distress. The conflict between human and wildlife is a pressing conundrum which entails casualty of human life, property, and endanger the viability and existence of many vulnerable species.

Destruction and dispossession of livestock by predatory tigers changed the perception and attitude of the people in the Sundarbans that led to retaliatory measures in certain cases by the affected people of the Sundarbans. (Jagrata Juba Shanga 2003; Jalais 2007a; Gurung et al., 2008a). Thus, the policy of tiger safeguarding has raised the issue of focusing on the livelihood pattern of the communities living in this area, and the entire gamut of human-tiger conflict is premised on the socio-economic motif of the local communities. (Jalais 2007b; Chowdhury et al., 2020a).

Though the parameter of human-mauling seems to have abated in recent years, it is still a pressing problem for the local communities who are largely dependent on the forest to eke out a living; foraging in the forest is the only prospective wherewithal for many people living adjacent to forest, and those lost their lives by the savage of tigers are generally the sole breadwinners of the family members. (Azad et al., 2005a; Gurung et al., 2008b; Chowdhury et al., 2020b). The article is an endeavour to explain the swatch of human-tiger conflict in the India Sundarbans by way of explaining the cultural and religious stigma of tiger-killings affecting the surviving widows. In a conservative society where widows are usually subject to various social restrictions. The tiger-killing further aggravate their suffering owing to the cultural stigma being adhered to the tiger attack. The other aspect of the article is the elucidation of interaction between tigers and human beings with the ecology of the Sundarbans acting as confederation. For a long time, the tracts of forests and wild animals have been considered as perpetual, as areas where time did not elapse. But at present, this interpretation of natural environment has changed and it does not remain as unaffected and unaltered entity. The changes in natural environment induced by climate change is one of the influential factors that changed the behavioural pattern of the tigers of Sundarbans. The drivers of changes in the environment has brought about by human induced practices and influences that, in turn, changed the natural flow of the ecology of Sundarbans and these changes are quite visible. These altered environmental pattern has a huge effect on the habitat of tigers and influenced the behaviour of tigers. The Europeans' depiction of tigers as ferocious and human attackers was largely propelled by their perception and existence beliefs of tigers as man-eating animals. It was construed that tigers intrinsically dislike the proximity of human beings and even the odour of a human being turned them away.

II. LAND AND THE PEOPLE

The epithet attached to Sundarbans is probably derived from the Bengali signifying beautiful forest ("sundar bon"), or the Bengali name for the chief timberland of commercial value("sundry"). The expanse of the Sundarbans of Bangladesh and India having approximately 10,000 km² is considered the largest and chequered biodiverse mangrove swamp in the world. (Iftekhar and Islam 2004b; Giri et al., 2008; Iftekhar 2008). With its massive ecological and economic viability, the Sundarbans remains as a storehouse of unimpaired ecosystem. This tenable eco-sustainable tract, with an area of 2584.89 km² has been divided into three zones- Core, subsidiary, and buffer zone. The place is also a renowned habitat for the subcontinent's largest populations of Royal Bengal tiger (*Panthera tigris*). The people living in this area have to face the persistent travails of natural disasters. The onslaughts of frequent cyclones and monsoonal thrashing is a perennial threat to the people living alongside watercourses and shorelines. Around 4.1 million people live in Sundarban (General, 2001) (3.5 million in Bangladesh), 32% of whom rely on the resources of Sundarban mangrove forest directly or indirectly. Land being scarce the poor people tend to depend on forest resources. The parameter of human-tiger conflict has been measured in the way of the reliance of the local people on the forest for sustenance and livelihood, and the forest, for them, serves as a potential provenance over the years. (Azad et al., 2005b; Gurung et al., 2008c; Chowdhury et al.,2020c).

But restrictions on the free access of the local communities came in the way of their livelihood pattern and created glaring economic inconsistencies. Subsistence depending on natural resources are always subject to peaks and troughs that came in the forms of variant natural tribulations, and rendered the communities in extreme vulnerable straits. (Ferrol-Schulte et al., 2013). However, the expedition of the local people to the forest is the only sustainable option for maintaining their livelihood, and thus, they braved the peril of their lives in search of fish, wood, collection of prawn seeds and honey. Human-tiger conflicts in the Sundarbans has become a regular practice by way of attacking about 40 people every year. National Geographic The Sundarbans Tiger Widow Welfare Society observes that the number of "tiger widow" residing in West Bengal is around 3,000. In the Gosaba block alone, 600 tiger widows are living at present, according to the society's data. Nakul Jana, president of the Sundarbans' Tiger Widows informs that as many as 100-120 people fall prey to tigers every year in the Sundarbans, says Nakul Jana, president of the Sundarbans' Tiger Widows (Acharya,2019).

III. SOCIO-CULTURAL STIGMA

Chen (2000) points out that societal strictures act as a barrier to the tiger-widows to marry again, and their day-to day life is determined by various social norms and restrictions. They are denied access to all kinds of social events

and religious festivals as their presence, as the patriarchal society observes, would bring in bad fortunes. These unethical and biased social practices largely jeopardise the normal course of life of the widows, challenge the economic security of the widows, and malign their dignity, self-esteem and their engagement with the society. They are very often beset by various trappings of social ostracism, physical and mental humiliation, and psychological trauma that led to the development of anticipated threats to the social order. The social marginalization of widows further leads them to physical assault and other forms of violence against them. Myth arising from social order and when they result in over simplified stereotypes that determines the personal perception and social interaction of the widows. The widows of Sundarbans, particularly the tiger-widowhood have to undergo various cultural and religious stigma after having their husbands being killed by tigers. Their widowhood has a heightened impact on all corridor of their life, particularly mental and psychological well-being. The tiger-widows do not find any amicable place in the mainstream of the society, and are often being stigmatized in the stereotype social fabric. Ablon(2002) observed that stigma is a socially construct malaise that attests to the bleak evaluation of particular aspect of behaviour. The life of widows over the globe is a miserable tale of social injustice (United Nations [UN], 2001) and this fabricated affliction has taken the form of societal issue that tells on the economic and social patterns of the widows, and also endangered their physical, sextual and mental well-being. (Chen, 1998; Begum, 2011). The socio-cultural construction of stigma related with tiger attacks in the Sundarban delta, in India not only ostracized the tiger-widows in the society and stripped them of social justice but also drove them susceptible to mental health. Kazim (2011) has, thus, very rightly said that a new social bifurcation is appearing in the deltaic regions of the Sundarbans- the tiger-widows. Such a situation put them in dire economic straits. Shiba Sardar (40), a tiger widow, who hails from Satjelia which is often referred to as 'Bidhoba Para' or 'Widows hamlet', said she is able to cope with the onslaughts of cyclones and even the perils of man-killing tigers, but is more concerned with her livelihood. She stared and remembered that it was a horrifying physical and mental struggle to eke out a living. With sarcastic remarks from others she went through the ordeal of extreme social isolation and poverty. As per official records, 52 persons were ambushed and killed by tigers in the Sundarbans from 2010 to 2017(India Today,2020). Tiger-widows are viewed as an evil and inauspicious. They are forced to live in isolation without having any social interaction with others. They are seen as a sign of misfortune and termed as "swami-khego." Apart from humiliation and discrimination, they bore the brunt of extreme financial struggle. This stereotype levelling acts as a deterrent to including them in the framework of mainstream community life, and in several blocks of Sundarbans they were forced to live in a segregated hamlet, called Bidhoba Palli (widow hamlet), which conforms to their outcast status from the community (Ojha & Chakraborty, 2009). Added to the whips of stigma is the telling effect of physical and sexual exploits and abuses. Thus, nearly half of the tiger-widows are found having traumatised and mental inflicted symptoms. In a study conducted on 65 women whose husbands lost their lives by tigers — government estimates put the total number at 1,000 both sides of the border — the study, funded by the World Bank, found 44% of the 65 women have developed designated mental illnesses symptoms, of which most were prone to depressive disorders (MDD) including recurrent MDD (14.8%), dysthymic disorder (11.1%), and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (5.5%)” (Ghosal,2016). The widows have to undergo the ordeal of the trappings of social stigma and are declared the forest interlopers as illegal they are not entitled to perform mortuary rights for their husbands for fear of being identified by the forest personnel. It is very appalling travails for the tiger-widows since in most of the cases the remains of the victim can hardly be retrieved. This cultural and social trauma is always haunting them and gnawing at their physique.

IV. RELIGIOUS STIGMA

Bonbibi is considered as the guarding deity of the people of the Sundarbans forest. Thus, a tiger attacked is deemed as a portent and linked to the Bonbibi, the presiding deity of the islanders of the Sundarbans, and any effort to violate the dictates of Bonbibi, as the islanders perceived, would bring about the wrath and curse of the Bonbibi to the people who dared to disobey the Bonbibi. Thus, myth and worship has become interconnected. The aged and disabled widows are the worst sufferers with rapid deterioration of health and dependence upon the mercy of others. The adoration of Bonbibi by the people of the Sundarbans has evolved over the centuries of human settlements in the Sundarbans and is epitomized as the sole protector of the forest. The faith in this deity is neither spurred by a subtle game of fear, nor a proof of courage, but a validation of ethical virtues, where Bonbibi, the sylvan deity, is to be looked upon. Living in the far-off detached islands in the midst of poverty, uncertainty, danger (climatic and animal attacks), and close to the forest or on the river bank they developed a forest religion

where Bonbibi stands as a personification of the forest who provides safety and security to the islanders and these moral and spiritual ethos are deeply entrenched in their social and cultural corridors of the islanders and handed down from generation to generation (Dutta,2011). Tigers are personified as protagonists and such images are appeared in many legends, myths, fairy tales, and fables. Thus, they are not merely animals to be captured and hunted. The invocation of Bonbibi is not to plead for salvation, but only to seek assistance during forest expeditions. Thus, it signifies a rather refined liturgy and complex ethics. The cult of Bonbibi, considered as a protector by the people living in this area, has immensely affected and influenced the perceptions, beliefs and understandings of the people of the Sundarbans. (Jalais,2010). It has been noticed that Bonbibi is not worshipped for salvation, but for safety- the personification of powerful characteristics rather than spirituality. The intensity of discrimination against those with mental health difficulties is also related to 'What matters most' in that particular cultural group (Yang et al.,2014). Tiger assaults in the deltaic region is looked on as deific profanity or an indication that Bonbibi's infuriation and incense will dawn on the sufferer and not provide any assistance from the attacks of tigers. This type of social perception about the tiger-widows lead to ingrain a sense of culpability and cursedness in the minds of the widows that effects their psychological wellness. The community's refusal to the tiger-widows as an ill-fated further aggravates their trauma and stigma that worsens their already unsteady and hazardous position as widows. The resulting discrimination, social ostracism, acute penury and hopelessness result in denial of the tiger-widows to very limited resources and these factors lead to long term mental health and increase the risk of psychological disorder and even have the heightened risk of suicide. The tiger-widows are accused of the unnatural and untimely death of their husbands and very often they are stigmatized and tainted as "swami-khego or husband-eater". This abuse often takes the form of sexual assaults by the in-laws of the widows.

V. CONCLUSION

With the accessibility issues being augmented by environmental vulnerabilities the livelihood options in the Sundarbans are becoming scare day-by-day. Socio-economic inequalities get inflated when the island is hit hard by disasters turning women and children even more endangered. The study analyses that the stigma of tiger-widows tells on the entire gamut of their life and makes them more prone to lifelong sufferings. They can hardly enjoy the dignity of living, fail to adjust to their family members and community, live a life of abject penury, and bear with multiplicity of trauma, humiliation, impoverishment, exploits and debasement. It is wry how the government ambitiously markets the Sundarbans as a spot of tourism, the locals are grappling with basic facilities. The human-tiger conflict in Sundarban represents a complex human-ecological risky interaction, viz., confrontation of socio-political and biological landscapes (Treves et al.,2003). There is a need to generate ample opportunities for the tiger-widows of Sundarbans to redefine their position with dignity and rights. Further, it is required to create more opportunities for the policy-makers and the society to cater to their basic needs and bring them back to the mainstream of the society. Otherwise the socio-cultural stigma against tiger-widows may increasingly take centre stage and create conditions for them to become susceptible to major depression. Thus, the ongoing debate on platter of human-tiger conflict calls for immediate attention that the local community does not unjustifiably put up with the consequences of conservation and appears more hostile to the policy of conservation of the Sundarbans while endangering the abidance of ecologically fragile ecosystem of various endangered species.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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