

Podcast Series (Transcription)

“Climate Disaster, Displacement and the State”

Calcutta Research Group

Episode 1

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“Climate Disaster, Displacement and the State” is a podcast series by the Calcutta Research Group in collaboration with Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung which is a part of CRG’s ongoing programme on migration and forced migration studies supported by Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, Institute for Human Science, Vienna and several other universities and institutions in India.

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US: The Sundarbans, home to the world’s largest mangrove forest, is also home to 4.5 million people who have been victims of climate disasters, especially floods and cyclones and an ever-rising sea, over the decades. The two cyclones of 2020 and 2021, Amphan and Yaas, respectively, wreaked havoc on inhabitants of the islands of the Sundarbans, resulting in widespread displacement and loss of homes and livelihoods. To stop the saline water of the sea from inundating the agricultural lands, embankments-a colonial legacy-were built multiple times throughout the years but failed to contain the rising sea.

Are embankments the solution to an ever-changing delta region? The displaced population were provided relief each time a natural disaster occurs... are they properly rehabilitated? Do state-sponsored rehabilitation and resettlement programmes address greater socio-economic concerns of life, livelihood and property, which are the biggest drivers of internal migration? Calcutta Research Group’s bilingual podcast series “Climate Disaster, Displacement and the State” will seek to investigate these pertinent questions by interviewing various stakeholders of the crisis... from villagers living the reality of climate change to members of local governance to activists to a state official... we will see how the ever-rising crisis is thought of and dealt with by the various stakeholder.

I am Utsa Sarmin an independent researcher associated with Calcutta Research Group and the host of this series. The podcast series is produced by Calcutta Research Group in collaboration with

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Today I will be in conversation with Aftab Uddin Halder, an activist from Sundarban. Aftab works as an operative in the Public Health Engineering Department of the West Bengal government. He has been running a civil society organisation called the "Sundarban Unnayan Mission" i.e. the Sundarban Development Mission which has provided relief for the refugees. Since the starting of 2021, along with a few left progressive organisations, Aftab has started the "Sundarban Shramajibi Adhikar Rokhhya Samiti" loosely translating to "Organization for the Rights of the workers of Sundarban". In this introductory episode, we will ask Aftab about the situation of Sundarban and the challenges of the people and the role of his organisation in raising these issues. Today's conversation will take place in Bengali.

[00:02:57]

US: Thank Aftab, for joining us today for this podcast episode.

[00:03:01]

US: According to your opinion and experience, as an inhabitant of Sundarban and a social worker, what problems would you say the people of Sundarbans face?

[00:03:10]

AH: The primary problem that the people of Sundarbans face is financial or economical. What are the reasons behind this? Mainly, the ecological diversity of Sundarbans controls the economic stability of this region. We know that Sundarbans is a well known bio diversity hotspot in the global map. But unfortunately no one has ever taken up a truly useful project that can ensure its development. They always just used its name. but nothing was ever done to make it *Sundar* (beautiful). However, the primary concern is of course, economical. The financial condition of people here is really bad. There is no stable means of income, how will they eat? People are absolutely dependent on agriculture and fishing. And if the only two means of income are not properly systematized then people are bound to be destitute. There are some reasons behind this. One of the main cause is natural disaster, namely, cyclones and breach of river embankments. And for these reasons, the little they earn by agriculture or fishing they cannot keep. Let me tell you my own experience.

When the lockdown started in 2020, we witnessed the desperate state of people and began relief work. We gained a great deal of experience while shifting from door to door. We realized why people of Sundarbans become migrant workers, why they leave their homes to go work elsewhere. Because of the lockdown these people got cut off from their work, their livelihood. So we asked them, "Why are you leaving your home to go work somewhere else? Do you not get work here?"

They said, “the little we can earn here is lost due to either because of the cyclones or the indifference of the government. We are stuck in a merciless cycle of never ending poverty. Salt water comes through the breached embankments and destroys our paddy fields and sweet water fish ponds. We live in constant fear of getting our houses demolished by cyclones but still we cannot leave. The meagre help offered by the government is not nearly enough and we are bound to look for work in other places to save our families, to earn a livelihood.”

Another problem with Sundarbans is the declination of bio diversity. The Mangrove forest, which can truly protect Sundarbans from cyclones and land slide, is being mercilessly cut down due to human greed of building more and more habitats. We need to save Mangroves. Government has plans for this but those plans almost never turn into reality. There are multiple projects for tree plantation but we never see trees being planted by the government. The responsibility to save the trees is huge.

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US: Can you tell us about these plans and projects of the government in a bit more detail?

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AH: There is this campaign called “Gachh lagan Pran bachan”(plant trees save lives). If you plant trees the land slide will decrease, the amount of oxygen in the air will increase, pollution will be reduced, lives will be saved etc. etc. Sometimes the trees are planted, but someone has to take responsibility to save the trees as well. Trees are planted, money is spent, plans are executed but the trees don’t survive.

The people who are leaving Sundarbans they actually want to stay, they don’t want to live in some alien place. But they will die of hunger if they stay. They need to eat, they need to live. If that situation can ever be created in Sundarbans where there is permanent and sufficient work, permanent embankments are duly created and protected, if Mangrove forests are protected and increased so that cyclones won’t wreak havoc on the people, then they will stay.

So what I was saying, that the people actually want to stay. They want the government to generate work, develop the roads, give proper healthcare services, refine the education system further. How were our roads made? The roads here were built towards Kolkata, keeping Kolkata’s benefit in mind. The government systematically built the roads so that fish and produce and workers of Sundarbans can reach Kolkata without difficulty. But the roads within the Sundarbans, that keep the inhabitants connected, increases community, those they completely overlooked.

[00:09:46]

US: Why did you feel the need to establish “Sundarban Shramajibi Adhikar Rokkhya Samiti? What are the demands of this organization?

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AH: Why did we build this organization? When lockdown started in 2020 and the period that it continued for, multiple cyclones like Amphan and Yaas happened, embankments were destroyed. We started the relief work and reached people. We realized their demands, we listened to what they had to say. They want to protect Sundarban, they want someone to protect their agriculture, their fisheries, their roads, their health, protect the immense natural resources that Sundarban carries within itself. If the government takes up truly useful and sincere projects to protect them then they don't need to go elsewhere. They can easily survive on the land and resources they have. If we present our demands in form of a collective, an organization they are bound to take us more seriously, treat us with more importance. That is why we thought it was best to organize people. Now we have built this organization called "Sundarban Shramajibi Adhikar Rokkhya Samiti" with the marginalized, impoverished people of Sundarbans along with those who are concerned about us, who think about Sundarban's people.

[00:11:28]

US: You talked about migrant laborers in the beginning. Is climate disaster the only reason behind the people of Sundarban becoming migrant workers? Or are there more institutional problems like education, healthcare, income? Can we say that they go elsewhere only because of the natural disasters, because the sea is engulfing their land or flooding everything and they can't do farming? Or are there other reasons?

[00:12:03]

AH: We need to delve a little deeper to realize the reasons behind this. There are some people in Sundarban who are financially well off. And where does this wealth come from? Land. Suppose someone has 50 bighas (1 acre = 1.6 bigha approx.) of land. He can't cultivate that much land alone. He needs workers. 10, 20, 100 or 50 workers, whatever. Now if a man has 100 workers they and their families all depend on him for their livelihood. If this land is ruined by natural disasters or embankment breach, then these people lose their work. The man whose land is that might survive because he has other lands, he is ten percent but the rest of the people, the ninety percent, are workers. What do they do then? The landlord cannot give them work if there is no land or pond to cultivate or crops to grow. If there is no fish to take care of, how can he provide them with work? That is why the poor workers are leaving, becoming migrant laborers, to tend to their needs, lives, hunger.

[00:13:14]

US: What do the people with land do then? If their lands or ponds are ruined by flood and embankment breach?

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AH: Yes, let me come to them. The few people who have enough land, they are associated with some business or other. Some have shops in town, some are service people, some have businesses. They get by. But what will the poor do?

[00:13:42]

US: do you know if the people who migrated from Sundarban want to return here? If they want to then what is the reason behind that? And if they don't, elaborate on the reason behind that as well.

[00:13:53]

AH: All of them want to stay in Sundarban, they want to stay in their birthplaces. They want employment. They want the government to handle the lives and livelihood of Sundarban more sincerely, to give them assurance about their livelihood. Then they don't need to go outside.

[00:14:17]

US: You were talking about land. Do all of the people in Sundarban have *Patta* (a special kind of lease issued by the government)? Those who don't how do they live?

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AH: In reality, there are several people who are virtually homeless, they don't have any land whatsoever. In Sundarban there are multiple lands that are governmental. For example if a river has dried up, that land. They build their houses in these lands, the landless people. Most of the time they live without any obstacle but legal obstacles could present themselves in future. The government doesn't ensure *patta* for all these people. There are no *patta* for these people. The government says, "a colony has erupted".

[00:15:07]

US: like a refugee colony?

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AH: Yes, like that but no land for them in spite of them living there for around 30 years. But the government refuses to give them *patta*. They live in government's land.

[00:15:19]

US: So that means government can evict them at any point?

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AH: Yes, that they can.

[00:15:23]

US: Has it happened at any point of time that people were living in government's land and got evicted? Do you remember any instance?

[00:15:33]

AH: No there are no such incidents coming to mind. But we see colonies getting evicted in the cities for rail projects and other reasons. Who can say that won't happen here? Our movement is for these people who stay in perennial fear of getting evicted from a 30 year old habitat. If the government will just list their names for the documents it gets solved. That doesn't happen. But political parties come from time to time, to increase the number of votes, they make promises but don't do the work. The work never gets done. So ensuring patta is also an important issue in our movement.

[00:16:18]

US: Have you ever gone anywhere to present this demand of ensuring patta?

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AH: yes we went to Kolkata.

[00:16:23]

US: Did you present any written document of your demands?

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AH: No. We are in the process of creating a memorandum. We have to collect information like when did the colony come together? What documents do they have? What is their situation? We have to address such technicalities to move forward.

[00:16:55]

US: You were talking about embankments earlier. What is the popular opinion of Sundarban about those? What does your organization think of them? Because the opinion about embankment varies, some want concrete embankments, some say that is not enough. Some scientists say that concrete embankments are never the way to go, we need to come up with something different altogether. So, what do the population want?

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AH: The people are seeing a lot of things in the media, they are listening to the lengthy lectures of the government about how Sundarban needs to be saved and what they are going to do. So this makes them doubt that maybe the government is providing for them but the political leaders and mediators are the incompetent and corrupt ones, they are the reason people are not getting what the government is promising them. They want a permanent solution to embankment breach. They don't

care what the embankment is made of, it can be concrete or anything else. They want a way to protect the embankments, so that they don't face danger time and again. So that their resources don't get demolished over and over. This is what they want, through whatever means possible.

[00:18:28]

US: Are there any concrete embankments? Those which are called Aila embankments because they were built after the cyclone Aila? Those are the biggest concrete embankments in Sundarban right? Are there instances of these being destroyed or breached? Because the ones we see breaking or breaching on news or hear stories about are always mud embankments. But do you know incidents where Aila embankments were broken?

[00:18:53]

AH: See, this is a controversial issue that if concrete embankments are breaching. Concrete embankment building procedure needs carefully calculated engineering and planning. So if we ignore all the details and calculations then the dam is bound to break. Engineers are providing us with methods but if those are not followed by who make or supervise the making of a dam, the dam will most certainly break, be it concrete or not. If we do follow, it won't. But here is the problem. If a work that costs 10 rupees is done within a 5 or 4 rupee budget how will the dam stay? So there are these doubts in the people of Sundaban they want specific and permanent embankments. Is this reasonable? An embankment will break if the flow is a bit more during full moon? It was not like this before.

[00:19:53]

US: What was it like before?

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AH: It was a feudal system. The landlord or the feudal lord had 200 bighas of land and the embankments that fell within their territory they built habitats around those. Those people, those inhabitants protected the embankments. Then the government took over, they started building embankments.

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US: When did the government take over? If you would elaborate on the history a little...

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AH: After the independence of India. It happened after the independence.

[00:20:21]

US: The feudal lords protected the embankments before that?

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AH: Yes, it happened in the 50s. So it was decided that the embankments will be looked after by the government. That's where the problem started. If those landlords took care of these, even at the hint of a breach they would repair it with more soil. The work got done. That was a positive side. But the feudal system is definitely a negative one.

[00:20:44]

US: Of course. So do you think that if the responsibility of building and protecting and repairing embankments was given over to the people of Sundarban, the solution to this problem would be somewhat permanent? What is your prerogative?

[00:21:02]

AH: I personally think that a specific law should be proposed solely for Sundarban's embankment. A law that will make sure that the projects about permanent embankment is executed.

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US: What will that law be like?

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AH: the law will ensure that the panchayat does not get the money and the responsibility for this project. Only specific officials or people will be presented with the duty to carry out certain tasks. Suppose within one kilometers, 5 people are told that "You will make sure to repair the embankment if any problem comes up". People have to be recruited. Only then can a continuous process will take place.

[00:21:59]

US: Now to repair a breach they will need resources and technology.

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AH: Yes, there is a fund allocated to these things in "Sundarban Unnayan Parshad"(Sundarban Development Board). That money is being drained by futile work.

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US: What kind of futile work?

[00:22:14]

AH: Suppose there is a tree plantation happening in Sundarban.

[00:22:17]

US: Pardon?

[00:22:17]

AH: Tree plantation program. Then the tree died. This is futile work. There are multiple projects like these which drain funds but don't work anyway. "Sundarban Unnayan Parshad" is funded by the central government, by World Bank. So I think what I said is the most efficient method, selecting a few specific people to put in charge of a limited area's embankment. Even if they are mud embankments, and are breached, those people can repair it in no time. Same goes for concrete as well.

[00:22:59]

US: If a mud embankment is breached, can the people fix it by themselves or do they have to wait for government officials to come?

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AH: No they fix it by themselves.

[00:23:14]

US: Oh, I see.

[00:23:14]

AH: Sometimes various NGOs come to their aid. But people have to survive so they try whatever they can, however little they can do.

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US: We can see that people of Sundarban are forced to leave their habitat for various reasons, be it flood water or embankment breach. Is there a government policy to reimburse these evicted people?

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AH: No there are no specific policies for Sundarban.

[00:23:41]

US: Okay. This is the last question I have for you today. If people here are told that the government will give them land near the city to stay, will they want to leave? What do you think? Although you said a little about this in the beginning, that the people of Sundarban want to stay here only. But if you could elaborate a bit more about why do they not want to leave, in spite of so many natural disasters. And what kind of development do they want so that they can stay?

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AH: The people living in islands that have no future, maybe the sea will engulf them in a few days, like Shojnekhali, Ghoramara,. The government can take projects to help them instead of developing

those islands which have no certainty of existence. If the island is not even there in a few years where will people live? Government can take steps to rehabilitate them in suburbs or cities instead. The Government can't develop these islands any further but they have to take steps of rehabilitation. Otherwise where will these people go?

Now, to address the other thing. Yes, they want to stay here because they feel attached to their birthplace. The problem with cities is that it lacks the sense of community, love for each other, shared concerns. That community exists here, against a thousand hazards, poverty and suffering. They feel attached to the nature here, the light, the air, the water, natural resources, even to the fish. They don't want to abandon their homes ridden with so much emotion. The attachment is too strong to sever. They leave only to deal with the burning hunger. But no one wants to leave Sundarban.

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US: Thank you for joining us today and sharing your views.

We heard from Aftab how the people of Sundarbans are willing to stay here despite the challenges posed by climate change, disasters and an increasingly difficult economy. The land is not just land or geographical territory. It is emotions, identity, even for the landless people of the Sundarbans. They may migrate in search of jobs and livelihood but never leave permanently. During our fieldwork in Mousuni and Sagar Island, in the extreme south of Sundarbans, we came across many people who think the same. They may fear that their islands are sinking and they will be homeless in the near future but the pull towards their homeland is making them raise specific demands to their representatives in the local government. The main demand is a permanent solution to the embankment problem. Every person we talked to said that their islands will be saved with proper concrete embankments. One such person is Mirza Mansur Alam Baig, a villager from Mousuni Island and the guest of our next episode. He also reiterates the necessity of a concrete embankment to save Mousuni. Are concrete embankments the answer to all the problems? Can there be a permanent solution to the climate crisis faced by the people of Sundarbans? More will be unravelled in the coming episodes.