

Podcast Series (Transcription)

“Climate Disaster, Displacement and the State”

Calcutta Research Group
Episode 2

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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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Welcome to Calcutta Research Group’s podcast series “Climate Disaster Displacement and the State” which seeks to investigate the concerns of climate change and climate disaster induced displacement in Indian Sundarbans. I am Utsa Sarmin an independent researcher associated with Calcutta Research Group and the host of this series.

Today our guest is Mirza Mansur Alam Baig, an inhabitant and a social worker from Mousuni island, one of the worst affected islands of Sundarbans. We met Mr Baig during our field-work in Mousuni. A young man of early forties, Baig doesn’t want to leave his home. He wants a permanent solution for his island. Sitting by the raging sea during peak monsoon season, we listened to his experiences and hopes for the devastated Mousuni.

[00:01:00]

US: Were you born here? Did your ancestors live here as well?

[00:01:08]

MB: During the colonial rule, my grandfather and grandmother came here. Mousuni was a forest back then. My grandfather came here and cleared a part of the island. After he cut the trees and made it worthy of inhabiting, the English gave him some land. Then the English were cast away in 1947 on 15th august. My grandfather then bought some land here settled down properly. First my father was born here then us and our lives are going on. We live here since the very beginning.

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US: Where did your grandparents originally come from?

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MB: My grandparents came from Kanthi, now in East Midnapur.

[00:02:00]

US: What changes have you seen in Mousuni Island since you were a child?

[00:02:05]

MB: Since I came to my senses as a child I have seen a river boundary here. Since then I have seen them build one... two... three river boundaries. The first river boundary, that I saw doesn't exist anymore. After repeated breaches in the embankment it became impossible to keep the embankment there. Department (*irrigation department of West Bengal government*) had to create a new embankment because the land where the previous embankment was built were submerged by the river. The second embankment was built a little closer than the first. Then that too started to breach and then came a stage when it was irreparable. Again some of the island got eaten up by the river. Now there is an embankment, I can't guarantee how long it will stand. I have seen three embankments being built, that's what I know.

[00: 03:08]

US: What did you experience during Amphan or Yaas and in their after math?

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MB: Aila, Bulbul, Phani or Amphan it was all about the storm. There was no tidal wave per say. First time in my life, during Yaas, I saw the water level rising so much. Yaas is having a lasting effect in our lives. After the announcement of the government we shifted other families. They said everyone had to come to the cyclone center or take refuge in any nearby big primary or high school. Every other family shifted to the center but not our family. At seven in the morning... The tidal waves we are acquainted with, that comes in from the river and inundates our houses are not so forceful that it destroys houses. We were expecting that kind of tidal wave. But then the tidal wave that came that was a once in a lifetime experience and tragedy as well. We have never seen such waves. I was having breakfast when my uncle came running from the east saying that, "Come quick, the water is here". And I said, "So what?" I said, "So what if the water came?". He said, "Just come take a look, it's coming as if a mountain is coming our way." I didn't believe him. Then when he saw that we weren't really listening to him, he took the two children, my daughter and my brother's son and began to run. When he ran, my wife and my brother's wife, they also ran with him. They said, "No, the water is coming on pretty heavy, who can say what will happen, we'll go." They left for safety. I came outside and saw, that a mountain really was heading for us. And I just stood there watching it. The water came in a heartbeat, and it didn't take even one minute, at least that's what I thought, to drown me up until my neck. Then another wave came which swept me away. Then I grabbed a branch of a tree and stood there with my phone in another hand. I figured I would stand there because if I swim further I may collide with something. After some time I saw our house, our mud house, gradually crumbled down and drowned. Now I am seeing this while hanging from the tree. After nearly two hours the water started ebbing. And I started feeling the land beneath my feet. When I saw there was nothing left of our house, I went towards the embankment and other people came out. They had started looking for me. I was at my house, not believing that such water could come. Then they saw me hanging from that tree but I couldn't go to them. Then I saw some animal carcasses floating down. The wave was so sudden that people couldn't save their farm animals. At least three cows and hundreds of goats floated past me. A lot of animals especially cows and goats died. When the water level dropped, I went to look for my children, my uncle and my wife. I went to my uncle's house and he has a two storied house. I found them there sitting in the first floor. This is what I experienced during Yaas. Now, we heard about the 1949 flood during our grandfathers' time, but we ourselves never saw such a wave.

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US: Do you find any changes in people's lives and livelihood after encountering continuous climate disasters?

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MB: I think the climate is changing all across the world because of the global warming. And I think that's what responsible for these big waves and sea level rising as well. Since our childhood we have seen the river grow and embankments breaching during storms but what we saw during Yaas that was abnormal. We couldn't even dream of it. So in my experience, all the lands have become uncultivable. After digesting so much saline water, the lands are not fertile anymore. What we can grow is fish, along with the water a lot of fish comes in. Some people are running their households, selling and growing fish, ours as well. But we don't sell, what we catch we eat ourselves so the cost of buying them is nil. Now if we think about doing it as a business we'd need to invest a lot more time there but I cannot do that since I do social work. If we put in some time then we can grow a business. But whatever people may say, agriculture and fishery is very different. Agriculture brings in a lot more success than fishery. Now after repeated attacks of saline water people have decided to buy land elsewhere and move permanently. But last two or three years more people, even people who've bought land elsewhere, are staying because of the Tourist Center. The land is still saline and infertile but the tourism has given a way of income. Each tourist centre (*resort*) has five to seven staff from the island. So, now the people are unwilling to leave, They say, "We will drown and die probably but where will we find employment again. Here we are working, let's stay here for now." Now, they have pleaded with the government and authorities to save the tourism center because not only those five to seven employees in the center are earning, it generates income for others too. After the tourism center was established the panchayaat gets an extra tax and they build a huge fund with that. That fund can is used fo some extra works. Apart from that the shop owners or toto (*electronic rickshaw*) drivers or boatmen and a lot of other people started having customers again and earning. So, the tourist center has somewhat made up for the loss that saline water caused. And for this reason, the people who have already bought land elsewhere and the people who were thinking about it, both are in a state of dilemma about leaving the Island. The water submerges their homes sure, but there is work. This is their hesitation. The biggest issue is that, we know the Netherlands is also a low land. How did their government build the embankments so that they are not getting destroyed? They don't have any floods, they are happy and even prospering. The embankments don't get breached. We don't hear about these problems there. What we do know that in spite of being a low land, the people of the Netherlands are happy and protected. Our Mousuni is a lot more elevated than Netherlands still our embankments are crumbling down. Can't our government make plans resembling Netherlands'? If that could be done, I don't think people will be willing to leave the island. They will live without perils if a solid embankment could be built. If they (*government*) go and look at what Netherlands' government is doing, I think they surely will come up with something for Sundarban's embankments. We are simple people, what do we know. But we have this expectation. If that happens, I think the people of Sundarban would lead a peaceful life here only. We will be able to earn and live with our kids, our families. We would stand a chance against the nature.

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US: We'll talk more about Netherlands, but you mentioned the tourist center as well, could you elaborate on that? I mean what is a tourist center, when was it built, did the government build it?

[00:14:19]

MB: No. The tourist center was not built by the government. In 2017, a resort was made here. Well not a resort, from what we saw, some tents were pitched. Some school children (*college students*) would come every three or four months and they would visit places for research purposes. In 2018, one of our panchayaat members, Kaium *babu*, who got elected that year, he racked his brain to come up with an idea that could generate income for the local people. So he called us one day to talk and said that “I have contacted some people, they will come here. We will give them some land and help them build resorts and make Mousuni a tourist centre. Do you all have a problem with that?” So we said, “No. What problems could we have? We don’t have any problems. The women might have problems but we’ll handle that.” He then asked us to cooperate with the potential owners and said he would contact the people outside. He also asked us to see how we liked the position of the tourism centre. Then he brought some two or three people from Kolkata, and he sold them the land in a very minimum amount. Someone said that he won’t give any money, still he gave him some land. He consulted the his constituents and then gave or sold the lands. So he started the tourism centre in 2018. Before, people used to come once in three-four months but after building the resorts, people are coming every day. After people saw the booming business, more became interested in buying land. We didn’t have to request potential owners to come. People from Kolkata are investing on their own. He kept selling the land and now there are 70 to 80 resorts here and some 20-30 resorts are on their way. So this here, our panchayat member, carried out this huge and elaborate plan. We also requested him for the main thing. We have now asked him to help us with the embankments, to build long lasting river boundaries. You have done so much for our livelihoods already but now help us live and save us from the water.

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US: That was actually my next question, that this area is being ravaged by flood and storm and we have seen resorts in south Mousuni absolutely ruined after Yaas. Now you’re saying that resorts are still being built. Aren’t the owners afraid?

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MB: The owners who have lost their resorts, they are very heartbroken but they have already started buying land on other parts of this island, away from there. They are building resorts. But the loss that they are facing is huge and they talked with the panchayat members and that reached the authority’s ears. They have requested the minister to save the tourist centres as the natural disasters are destroying the resorts and the income that it generates for the local people. They requested him to build a small but strong concrete embankment to save the tourist centres, the resorts, to save the economic stability that has been formulated here. They have placed their demands with the minister. And the minister also said that...

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US: Which minister?

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MB: Sundarban Affairs minister Mr. Bankim Chandra Hazra. He also listened to them and promised to appeal to the Chief Minister (*of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee*) to save the tourism industry here and try to do it as soon as possible. They will decide whether a small concrete boundary would work or a big one would be needed. I don’t think a big one is needed here, a small but concrete one would do. That will save us. You have to understand that the embankments now are majorly made out of sand and sand will fold the moment water touches it. But if it is earthen it does not fold that

easily. That is why a concrete embankment does not need to be very big. The embankments are breaching because of the sand. The global warming is causing the sea level to rise and as soon as the water touches the sand it is washing away. If it was mud, it wouldn't have washed away. So, a big embankment is not needed, a small one would serve the purpose.

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US: But some people are saying, some scientists even that concrete embankments would actually be less effective rather planting mangroves will give better results. What do you think? Do you and other people in the locality want concrete embankment?

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MB: People want concrete embankment, no doubt. But of course we need the mangrove trees. Mangrove resists the water and keeps the island from falling apart. So we need the embankments as well as the mangroves but the biggest need of the hour, are boulders. They need to put boulders in the river in front of the embankments, where they're breaching. Or they need to put cages. If they put cages, the silt carried by the water will be deposited in them and the land will become higher than it is now. Then our islands can be saved.

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US: The people who are not associated to the tourism, how are they getting by?

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MB: They...

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US: Are they getting help from the government?

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MB: Yes the government has helped. The relief that we got after Yaas, that alone can last us for six months.

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US: Is this only the government's relief or NGOs..

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MB: No several NGOs gave those. The government is providing us with free rice regularly, that almost lasts 15 days, if not a month. And other sorts of relief are also coming from different sources. It is enough for now but how long can it last? People need their own income, relief cannot be the only way to survive. After those six months, what will I do? That we need to think and that is why the biggest demand of people here is to save the tourism centre. It became a major source of our income. Secondly, to save the resorts a concrete embankment has to be built and boulders or cages has to be put in the water.

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US: We have almost reached the end of this episode. This is the last question for you. The people who have migrated elsewhere for work, do they want to return? And the people who are already here, do they want to stay here or migrate for work? If they want to stay here, why? If they want to leave, why?

[00:22:54]

MB: Now what you have to understand is, around 70% of the people here used to go outside to find work. After the tourist centre was built, why are they still leaving? The percentage has reduced,. Instead of 70, now 40 to 30% of the people are migrating. If we calculate the percentage it will definitely be 30 to 40. But it was 70 before. Now it is 30 after the tourism centre was built. Have all the people found work because of the tourist centre? No. So they have to migrate for work. Now they are returning once they finish working. They have to return to their birth place. But they have to leave again in search of work. The last question you asked that why do the people still don't want to leave after so much has happened... or why do they want to leave? They are actually in a dilemma. They don't know whether the government will build concrete embankments. But they want to stay because they have understood the tourist centre is generating work. Then they are thinking if we continue to stay without embankments. After witnessing Yaas, they are thinking maybe one day the tidal wave will rise so much that our children and family will be drowned. They want to move because of this fear. Again, some people are saying, we may drown but what's the point of leaving. So many people are staying back. If we have to die, we will die together.

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US: If the government offers you land and houses in some place else because Mousuni is getting wrecked would you want that? Or would you want to save whatever is left of Mousuni?

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MB: No, we wouldn't want that. We would want to save whatever is left of Mousuni.

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US: If the Netherlands can build embankments and protect their land, why can't India do the same for the Sundarbans? This question was raised not only by Mr Baig but by every Mousuni dweller we came across during our fieldwork. The devastating Yaas which shook the islanders, many of whom witnessed such destruction for the first time in their lives, made them aware of the precarious conditions they are in. They don't want to leave. But they may have to if the government doesn't take immediate measures to save them. And they are demanding that. Banking on traditional wisdom, they want concrete embankments with boulders and tree-line to protect those, rather than earthen embankments which are easily breached by the sea.

Even though the agricultural fields are inundated with saline water from the sea killing their livelihood, Mousuni is still functioning. The burgeoning tourism resulting in a rapid increase in resorts along the South bank of Mousuni, seems to be the lifeline of the islanders. The tourist resorts provide them with necessary jobs and a source of income. Not only for the resort owners but also local toto i.e. electronic rickshaw drivers, sweatshop owners etc. The Yaas destroyed some of the resorts but their owners are rebuilding as that is the only source of livelihood left for them after cyclones and lockdown due to COVID. To protect their resorts, they have gone to the local panchayat, i.e. the local government representative in search of solutions. What did they ask for? What sorts of interventions a local panchayat member can do or have been doing vis á vis the climate change and what demands does the representative have from higher-ups in the government is the topic of our next episode where we interview one of Mousuni's panchayat members, Abdul Kaium Khan. Stay tuned for our conversation.