

Podcast Series (Transcription)

“Climate Disaster, Displacement and the State”

Calcutta Research Group
Episode 3

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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.

In the last episode we listened to Mirza Mansur Alam Baig’s experiences of climate disaster and his demands from the government. Today we go to Abdul Kaium Khan, one of Mousuni island’s Panchayat members. This quadragenarian takes us through Mousuni’s history, intertwined with his own history, childhood and experiences of climate disaster and his role as a local government representative in handling the increasing challenges posed by a rapid climate change.

[00:01:01]

US: What is the difference between the Mousuni island of your childhood and the Mousuni island now? What effects do the climate disasters, global warming, loss, have on Mousuni island?

[00:01:15]

AK: When Mousuni island was discovered, it was a delta amidst the ocean. The river had built layers upon layers of mud here. Different seeds had been washed into the layers and made a forest. When the island was made, most of the people who lived in the area, now known as East Mednipur, came here first. Eventually, they occupied several islands, for example, Mousuni, Namkhana, Gosaba, Buraburir Tat, L plot, G plot, these were totally inhabited by the people of Mednipur. When they came here, the first inhabitants, like my father, Mousuni was a jungle where tigers and other animals lived. There was nothing called a river boundary or embankment, the river ebbed and flowed on its will. They started building small makeshift embankments and made a life here. But the people who actually disbursed these islands, especially Mousuni, were the English. They calculated and mapped out the whole place, deciding the drainage system, and where the embankments will be. After the system was in place they started dividing the place and gave 15 bigha (*around 5 acres*) lands to the people who came here and cleared out the forest. The land that

was leftover, after this, are being traded normally. Now, the drains and intermediary embankments and the places that were not divided by the English were marked as 'Khaas' (government lands). The drains, embankments are all known as *Khaas* lands. This place where we are sitting now, is called Salt Gheri. The colonial salt law was broken here. The old infrastructures for salt production is still here in the east. This place is totally alienated from the Mousuni island. The refugees and people who have no land started living here first. When the population here increased, they were given '*Patta*' (lease) from the BDO (*Block Development Office*) office with help of a five-man committee. Currently, only a handful of people have the lease, others are just living without a lease, casually. When we were young, you know, it was almost 40 years ago. Forty years ago, there were big mounds of sand on the island. They were 100 to 200 feet high and laced with herbs and other plants. This was back when we were eight/nine years old. We used to climb these sand mountains and slip to the bottom. This was an interesting game we played. I lived here till I was nine years old. When I was nine, in 4th grade, my mother died. After her death, my elder brother, who worked in the police department in East Medinipur took me there. There I lived with him and studied in Kaanthi. I came back 26-27 years ago. Here in the salt gheri, there was no question of irrigation alignment. This Mousuni island was discovered at least 110 years ago. In the last hundred years, there were no embankments. Recently two years ago the embankments were built. Because of global warming and land erosion, the ocean's surface is rising, this we know from paper, media, TV or the opinions of scientists from different places. We have come to know that because of global warming the ice is melting and also for land erosion newer deposits of silt is layering the ocean. So the ocean is becoming higher and the amount of water is also increasing. Which in result have produced and will be producing tidal waves.

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US: Are the people aware of global warming here? Does it come up in their regular conversations?

[00:06:28]

AK: Yes they talk about it among themselves. They know the tidal waves and floods, and what happened during Yaas are being caused by the rising level of water, the layering of ocean belly. They know that the depth of the ocean is decreasing. They talk among themselves and are somewhat aware. At least some of the people, a certain percentage do. So, this is why, this particular tidal wave is not much of a topic of conversation here. They know what is behind it. Some people of faith, they believe that this continuous monstrosity of nature and loss is the result of God's, their respective god's, wrath. They believe the gods are angry with the deterioration of society. They are submitting to this unquestioningly. And the people who are aware, educated they can figure out the cause and effect of the situation.

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US: Has any awareness program about global warming been held here in Mousuni by the Panchayat?

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AK: Mousuni's panchayat has 18 booths and 15 members. Eventually there will be a double member system. Now each member is their own person. The area that I am associated with, I organize awareness campaigns like health campaigns or educative campaigns about the underground water crisis. I do that in the constituency I am in charge of. I individually arrange these awareness campaigns for the people. Be it Global warming or drinking water crisis I have conducted a number of programs to alert the local people so that they don't finish the drinking

water by wasting water. There is a huge crisis of water in multiple corners of the world or maybe even in India. So I arrange these campaigns to try and save whatever amount of water that we can. Also about health related subjects. I am spreading awareness about Global warming too. I tell them about ice melting because of global warming. That melted ice has increased the amount of water in the oceans. Plus the land erosion that is taking place, for example, one third of Mousuni's original land has eroded and been washed into the ocean. This eroded land has layered the underbelly of the ocean. So eventually the water holding capacity of the ocean is reducing. I do these campaigns in my area.

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US: You just said that one third of the Mousuni island has eroded into the ocean. People must have lived in that land. After they became landless by the climate disasters and rising water level. Were they reimbursed by the government for their loss? Were they relocated in Mousuni or anywhere else in Sundarban?

[00:10:15]

AK: No. Previously we had the left front government for 34 years. In my life, I have seen multiple embankments break and thousands of bighas of land just washed away. After the land was gone, the left front government or the panchayat officials and social workers took lands from other people by bargaining with them and built embankments there. They would come to the country side to take away those lands and build these embankments. Now the people who didn't want to give up their lands, they were convinced by hook or crook to give up their land. One sacrifice had to be made for the greater good.

[00:11:05]

US: So you're saying that the embankments were built upon other people's land.

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AK: Yes...

[00:11:11]

US: This is something that the left front government had done?

[00:11:12]

AK: Yes...

[00:11:12]

US: The people whose land were taken away, were they reimbursed, relocated?

[00:11:16]

AK: No, they weren't relocated. If that land was all someone had left they became landless and live in the proximity of the embankments in makeshift houses. So what I was saying is that every work opportunity that has presented itself in the recent past, be it migration, learning handiwork, or any other way like tourism, has made the people more independent financially. So finally they have bought land elsewhere in Mousuni and are currently living there. The government hasn't given anything back. But 10 years ago, the current government under Mamata Banerjee, passed the Land Acquisition Act and built Aila embankments (colloquially, concrete embankments in Sundarban are called Aila embankments as the big concrete embankments were built after the 2009 cyclone Aila).

These embankments were made on land that the government bought from the people who owned them. There are still a lot of places where concrete embankments haven't been built. In many places, earthen embankments are in use.

[00:12:34]

US: Why do you think so many people are leaving Mousuni island, migrating for work to other states?

[00:12:40]

AK: Mousuni panchayat has 28 to 30 thousand people under its jurisdiction. From these 30 thousand people, a certain percentage leave for work. The thing is, the primary way of income is fishing and apart from that labor. Labor has a wide range of varieties, for example, some people are carpenters, some masons and a lot of other things- every kinds of services that you need to live in a society, is distributed among these men. Like, people who are associated to handiwork industry, earn their living from that. Now the youth, or young men, who don't know handiwork they go to find work in foreign land, and see that in those states, you don't have to spend a lot of money on trivial things. And their wages are pretty good too, 1000 to 1200 rupees in a day. Now if they work 25 days a month, they still earn 25000 rupees per month. Even if they spend 5000 rupees for foods and other necessities, they can easily save 20,000 rupees. They sometimes work for seven-eight months or even a year and send their families a fixed amount of money. They have had the taste of decent wage and lifestyle. So, even if a work opportunity presents itself here in the island, they are leaving for work. Then they are sending money to their families, buying land, building houses or sometimes getting their daughters married or building a store for their sons. This is the main thing.

[00:14:45]

US: Are some of the families leaving because of the climate disasters and financial loss or the financial loss induced by natural disasters? And when they're deciding to leave, what kind of help does the government offer?

[00:15:02]

AK: What I was talking about.... the islands here started out as mere *char* in the river then it became a delta with dense forest. A place like that, which belonged to no one, marked as government's. For example, the Sagar island, which houses the ashram of Kapil Muni. In our Mousuni island on side of the island breaks while the other side forms for geographical reasons. In Sagar island's case, a river *char* has sprung up and with time some trees grew and made it into a large island containing thousands of bighas of land. Now some people are living there without any paying any rent or leasing. Sagar is also the home of minister Bankim Chandra Hazra, member of West Bengal's legislative assembly (MLA). So these people who moved to Sagar from Mousuni were asked by the MLA to bring a written document stating that they're landless. They did that with our help and now their living condition is somewhat stable. Now some of their family members are still here and some have fully left. But the number of people abandoning Mousuni totally is very limited. The people who've partially left, left because of another reason all together. They are making most of the opportunity to get free government land in Sagar island. Suppose someone was alone but now has a family, he can divide his land among them and send some to live in Sagar while the rest remains here.

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US: You're saying there are only a few embankments in Mousuni. So, have the local people or you as a local representative placed your demand with the government to build new embankments?

[00:17:03]

AK: So, let me tell you something. I am a low level member of a small panchayat. My respect, significance, importance or role however you put it, is minimal to be very honest. So, as a representative of the masses I have written a mass petition about the embankments to all the relevant departments. I have been doing this for as long as I can remember. I have sent the petition to the local panchayat members, the head of panchayat (*Sarpanch*), the president of panchayat, a member of District Council, our MLA. Now, like the SDB (Sundarban Development Board), another department has also been formulated, Gangasagar-Bakkhali Development Authority, which is called GBDA. This was founded by the government itself within Sundarban. Bakkhali and Gangasagar were under its jurisdiction. But a few months ago Mousuni's Baliara Mouja (a type of administrative district) and Kusumtala Mouja, were included under GBDA. The chairman of this GBDA is Srimanta Malik, Namkhana district council's president. Now since those two Moujas were included under GBDA, we demanded, alongside Bankim *babu*-the current Minister of Sundarban Affairs-we requested them and they also assured that a concrete embankment would be built. Some contribution would be made by the GBDA and some from SDB. We are hoping that their collective initiative would smoothly carry out the unfinished concrete embankments soon. And they have assured us that this will happen.

[00:19:45]

US: Has the government provided you with any deadline or specific plan to carry out this project?

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AK: They have not specified any date or such but in our experience we are sure that within a year some result will show. We are hoping for an answer within a year.

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US: What kind of embankment do you want here? Concrete or earthen? Which do you think will help Mousuni survive?

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AK: The characteristics of the river here and situation of the Mousuni island is something like this: on its West there is the Bay of Bengal, on its East there is a creek called Chinai, and it's quite narrow. Now, on one side you have an endless ocean and on the other you have one of the narrowest creeks. So on the west side, Mangroves have no control over the waves and current. Last year by the government's initiative, Mangroves were planted on the east side, i.e. the Chinai riverside along 22 hector land and the same initiative will be taken this year as well. They were thinking of covering 10 hector land but that will maybe increase up to 20-22. So, mangroves are being planted. On the east side an earthen embankment with some "geo chots" will do for now. The embankment that was built there after Yaas, is in perfect condition and trees are being planted as well. There is a negative side to this as well, Mangroves thrive in mud but if sand layers around the roots of mangroves, the trees inevitably die. So we have to think of that as well. The river may change its course for various reason but if it deposits sand in the roots of the mangroves, the saplings will surely die. But where there is mud and soil, the saplings grow beautifully. So the east side now has mangroves and an earthen bank, it will be better if later on a concrete embankment is built there.

But one thing that I have to say is that, the engineers who makes plans sitting in an AC room, their opinions are not always right. If they come here, work practically on the field, stay here and then come up with a scheme, I think it will be more effective and people will find a strong shelter. We have witnessed and experienced a lot, we have seen land erosion and much more over the years, so if you ask for my opinion, I would say the engineers, like you and your team, should come down to the field and talk to the people. Then they can make a fruitful project or scheme for the people here. There is a huge difference between bookish knowledge and practical. If you ask for my personal experience I would say that, if Netherlands, in spite of being a country by the water, can prosper and live, our government can easily save Mousuni with the help of foreign technology if they really want to. But will they? That is the question. Because I am 49 years old I have not seen a single concrete embankment or how it works. It's the irrigation department's ritual to come by only when there's a flood or a tidal wave or a storm and build an earthen embankment which will then inevitably breach or crumble. That is it. These are basically use and throw embankments. But if they really decide to formulate an ideal infrastructure for the islands, they can always come during summer. That way the embankment gets time to adjust and the labourers can work easily as well. But they don't. They come only during emergencies and build use and throw embankments. Their only purpose is to resist the water during monsoon and after that whatever happens, happens. There is not one embankment that wasn't built during monsoon. Not one was built during the dry seasons, with enough time.

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US: So have you let the government or irrigation department know that you want them to work during the dry season or summer?

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AK: I am a member of this panchayat since 2003. I became a member when I was 29. I am 49 now. How many years? I have fought since then, appealed to multiple departments. But they never listened. The department is set in its ways. They have vowed they will work like this, no matter what is being said.

[00:25:27]

US: I heard that you have built a tourist centre here and helped build numerous resorts. Would you like to elaborate on that? Why did you do it? Why did you feel the need to do it? The people who own the resort do they have rights of the land?

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AK: Now the thing is this has not yet been announced as a tourist centre, officially. These are not even announced as home stay. Keeping the lives and livelihood of local people in mind, I arranged a system through individual initiative and the help of the local people. The place is marked as "*Khaas*" land of the Forest Department. The government had planted some trees around here which are still there. But this is helping people in earning their livelihood and that's huge. I, as a well wisher of the people, did this to keep their lives going. And the papers that I arranged with the government (for the resorts) clearly states that, if the government ever demands any of those plots for its use, no complaint from the lease buyer or seller will be taken into account. Their complaints will be immediately discarded. The government will claim its own place. I have all the papers, since I myself have written the conditions and these are all mentioned in the lease as well. And the reason behind this arrangement is simply that the local people will have something to get by. The people whose homes were in the leased plot of the resort, have to be hired by the resort owners. So, that the

family will have a source of income. Now that the number of resorts are so much and so many tourists are coming, they are hiring the whole family to work. The women work here even more since the types of work is mostly associated with women. Cooking, cleaning and managing utensils, serving the female guests, these are all women's territory. These things are there. If we look at it this way, the role of women is very significant here. That's the main thing.

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AK: Thank you so much for asking for our opinions and coming down here. I think we can end the interview here.

[00:28:02]

US: Thank you very much

US: The island that Mr Khan witnessed while growing up has changed vastly in the last few years. The fear of global warming is gripping the villagers of Mousuni. Many are requesting the panchayat member to help them find a place in other not so vulnerable islands of Sundarbans. Others are demanding a solution to their problems which often manifests as demands for embankments.

Mr Khan has complaints against the irrigation department of the West Bengal government. For him, the engineers and scientists do not listen to the concerns of the islanders and disregard any suggestions they may have regarding embankments. And as we heard in the last three episodes, the demand for concrete embankments is unanimous. We will take these complaints and opinions to Dr Kalyan Rudra, a scientist and a Sundarban expert, who, in our last episode, will unravel the embankment question and discuss the possibility of a long term solution.

The elected representative in this episode also mentioned how the resorts are providing alternative sources of income for the people of Mousuni, especially the women who are associated with these resorts as cooks or maids. Like any other crisis, the climate crisis is gendered. Climate change has impacted women and their livelihoods diversely. What were the sources of income for women of Sundarban, traditionally? How did the climate change affect those livelihood sources? What are the other challenges faced by these women due to climate change and natural disasters? We will take these questions to journalist Swati Bhattacharjee in the next episode to understand the gender angle of this crisis.