

## Podcast Series (Transcription)

### “Climate Disaster, Displacement and the State”

Calcutta Research Group  
Episode 4

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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.

I am joined today by journalist Swati Bhattacharjee. She is the senior assistant editor of leading Bengali daily Anandabazar Patrika. As a journalist she has worked for multiple Bengali news organisations. She has covered issues of labour, right to food, gender, public health, migrant crisis among others. In a recent story she has highlighted how the climate crisis has affected the livelihood of women in Sundarban and in turn created widespread concern for their public health. In this episode we will talk about her work on Sundarban, especially the women and how the climate crisis are shaping their lived realities and whether there are any government interventions to address the same.

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**US:** Thank you for joining us today.

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**US:** In one of your recent articles you have written that Sundarbans is a frontier where the 21<sup>st</sup> century war between man and climate change is taking place. Can you please elaborate on that?

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**SB:** If you’re ever arrive at the Sundarbans and go to any of the villages which have been affected by one of the storms, the big storms which have practically ravaged the villages, you feel exactly as if you’re standing in a war zone. People are struggling for life and livelihood. So we know that this is what wars do, they make life untenable, they are a threat to people’s life and they are a threat to

people's livelihood. And finally it results in impoverishment a long drawn war saps people of all energy and makes them poor, makes survival extremely difficult as a result of which many people just leave. It's very difficult to cope with a long drawn war over years. So, which is exactly what we see in the Sundarbans. There is reason to believe that even though the deaths from a storm, one of the hurricanes, immediately may not be very high but there is definitely a huge stress on people's health. Access to very essential services and products you know, like drinking water, nutritious food become so difficult that there is a, I mean, one can hardly live with any comfort or even any dignity. You'll find many many people living in makeshift huts or in shelters for very long time. So a lot of them also you find, they're migrating outside for work. So, you know we call them climate refugees and over the years it's difficult for anyone to keep track of how many people, men, women and children have migrated out of the Sundarban regions just in search of livelihood and to have a safer life. So in all counts, the Climate Change that we see here which has repeatedly exposed the people of the Sundarbans to cyclones. Just in the recent past we find there was Sidr in 2007, Aila 2009, Phailin in 2013, Hudhud in 2014, Bubul 2019 and then of course Amphan in 2020 and Yaas in 2021. This is clearly, I mean this is what the climate scientists say, that this frequency of big cyclones is a manifestation of climate change. And it is very difficult to see how Sundarbans is going to survive that.

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**US:** We know that every global crisis and conflict are gendered. So during your field visits what, according to you, are the major concerns plaguing the women of Sundarban?

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**SB:** Well, one of course there's a threat to their livelihoods, it is still predominantly an agricultural area. So, the large changes, in land, in the kind of water, in the ecosystem in general, agriculture is becoming pretty much, almost untellable in many many areas, in some areas very difficult and not profitable. As it is I find that lot of people in Sundarban, find, they practice what we call subsistence agriculture that is to say they use most of their agriculture produce for their own consumption and sell only a very small portion. This is in contrast to many of the other villages in southern Bengal like Bardhaman or Medinipur or Nadia, where, you know, people are much more adept at producing a lot of greens and vegetables and selling them. So a lot of the profit that they do comes actually from their agriculture. Whereas in Sundarbans I find that it is majorly still a subsistence agriculture because of lack of sweet water for irrigation. In many areas, you know, they cannot have a winter crop, a proper winter crop. So, they have to depend on the rains and with climate change, for example this year, a lot of the affected areas are hardly growing anything at all. They have not been able to have even one proper crop of rice, compared to the other years. So, that is one of the big stress that they find. And of course along with that the women, men and women who opt to fish, to catch the seedlings of prawns or shrimps and this again, has become very difficult. First, they don't get it, they complain that they don't get it as much as they used to. And also a lot more people have become dependent on these natural resources because of the pandemic and the lockdown and the huge loss of jobs. So, those areas also are very stressed. Women work for very long hours, try to gather some kind of food and also some fuel to run the home. And women themselves are also migrating, this is a new trend. I find, on my last visit, that almost 30 percent of those who are leaving in buses to work in other states are women. I mean that's what people tell me, those who run the buses that 30 to 40 percent are women. So this shows that many women are leaving, they have always left, I mean our domestic maids in Kolkata those who stay in slums and work in people's homes or sell vegetables, men who paddle the rickshaws and the vans, all of them, a very large number of them come from Sundarban. We all know that but now the stress is so much that

the women are also migrating. So seasonal migration, long term migration both are taking place. But also for those women who are left behind, whose men are working in other states, but they are working, they stay behind to take care of the children, the elderly, to take care of whatever little property that they have, for them life is extremely difficult. They often have to, you know, if you're in Sundarban, you know that, one of the things that women do is get up very early in the morning and go out, they are either trying to catch seedlings of prawns or you are going to catch the crabs. And you have to work very far and it is often quite dangerous, just, you know, imagine putting your hand in a hole made by a crab and trying to catch it. It is something that they do day in and day out. But when men are not there the entire burden of running the whole family is on the women. And they have, because of the way our local governments, our panchayats have evolved, they have less negotiating power. So in many ways they are very vulnerable. So the stress on them is immense.

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**US:** You just mentioned the sources of livelihood for women but can you tell us what were the main sources of income for Sundarban's women traditionally? Did the climate crisis change these sources of income? If so, then how does the new reality affect them?

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**SB:** Well, as I said, I think that it is the stress on income because the regular sources of income from agriculture and from fishing are impacted by the cyclones. See livelihood patterns in some ways are already changing, if you visit Sundarbans you'll often find that, you know, there are Bheris which is, say, the fish cultivating pans. Actually in village after village people have converted their small land holdings into bheris, for fish, they're cultivating fish in their own backyard. So, when there is a cyclone and saline water comes in or the water that is already there in the fish pans, it overflows and the fish escape. That's half a year's income gone. This kind of uncertainty is very problematic for them. The other is you know, in Sundarbans, other than agriculture and regular fishing there are some professions available which actually border on criminality, in the sense that these are not practiced within a very clear, legal frame work. So, the brick kilns, the brick kilns not all of them have the environmental permission to function yet there are many of them. The people who are working here, the labourers from the Sundarbans they face a lot of misery, very low payment, very low wages, very bad living conditions. One only needs to visit a brick kiln, a brick making factory, to see how they live and how they survive. It's subhuman conditions. And what is worse is that the children are also living in a state of semi-slavery. They have no school, they have no playground, they have no way of living a healthy and happy life. So, that is another source of income which again makes them very vulnerable. And of course there are the traditional ways of income, which is you know going into the deeper forest for honey or for crabs, fish, sometimes also for wood, which they need very much. So, point is that a few people do have license go to today or permits from the forest department but many people now are also going without permit and what is worse, without experience, without training. So, they get killed easily by the tigers, by snakes, by crocodiles. We know that tiger deaths, deaths from attacks of tigers have gone up in Sundarbans in recent years. The reason is that, people have lost livelihood, other kinds of livelihoods, and it resorted to going to the forest. So this, all these sorts of incomes, that people have in the Sundarbans, is under stress. And I will also mention that there are, women especially, they sometimes do some piecemeal work, you know, they might do zari work in sarees and embroidery or they might do some tailoring or any other kind of handiwork for some extra income. But the wages for those are also now depressed. Because of the pandemic, the traders are taking advantage of the fact that more people want to work, they are desperate to work. And so they have depressed the wages. So, that is another problem.

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**US:** You have written, the women of Sundarbans are facing huge public health crisis due to their work in saline water inundated fields. What are these problems? Is there any initiative from the government to address this issue?

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**SB:** It is a very worrying trend that we see. It is nothing new, but it can be observed to be a trend that is not going to go away, and may affect more and more women. So, I have been a part of quite a few medical teams which go sometimes to Sundarbans to hold medical camps. So while in those camps, as I talked to women and also I talked to doctors I found that pelvic inflammation among women is very high and reproductive tract infections are very high. So, in almost every camp you will find women of all ages from 11 year olds to 50 year olds who are complaining of white discharge, very heavy white discharge and also pain and excessive bleeding and other kinds of problems which are all related to reproductive health, such as pain during sexual intercourse. And you can see that these women, you know, they're anaemic, they're suffering, they are underweight. They complain of a lot of pain and often they are very shy. They feel ashamed to talk about this and if the medical camp has a woman doctor then they find courage to come forward to speak.

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So, I happened to read several papers from Bangladesh which also speak about the fact that salinity of the water in Sundarbans that is affecting women's reproductive health both because of more salt water ingestion and also because of a very prolonged exposure to saline water. So these women are, when they are catching fish, they are practically submerged from waist down in the river and they sort of walk up and down the river to catch the seedlings. So this of course causes a lot of exposure of the genital areas to hypertonic saline water. So when I read about these papers and the idea that salinity may actually be causing certain problems maybe making the women more vulnerable to infections and pelvic inflammation finally. Then I started talking to gynaecologists who have been there, experienced professors. And then they say and also the local health workers, they all say that they too find these problems, these symptoms in women a lot. And I was quite shocked when in Hingalganj, I found that many doctors, these are both doctors qualified from medical colleges or doctors, I mean quote-unquote doctors who are you know, rural practitioners. They both advised hysterectomy as a cure and excessive bleeding is often shown as the cause of tumour. I had never heard the word of uterine tumour before and I went there and tumour in the uterus is a thing which I heard quite a lot. So when I talked to the doctors and also the women health workers in the area I found that this word is used to explain the excessive bleeding and also to instill a kind of fear in the women. That if it is a tumour then it must be cancer and if it is cancer then it is best to just cut out the organ. So with that idea a lot of women are actually willingly undergoing hysterectomy to, you know, get rid of the problem of excessive bleeding. And these are often quite young women. One young woman who buys prawn seedlings from the women, she told me, that she has heard of at least seven or eight women, of her village, who have had hysterectomy. Now, just one young woman knowing seven eight women of her village shows a very, indicates I would say, indicates that we have a problem there. When I talked to doctors in Basirhat, towns which are close to these villages, there also I find, they tell me confidentially, that the rate of hysterectomy in the nursing homes and hospitals, private hospitals is quite high. Unfortunately the number of hysterectomies that is done under the government health insurance scheme, which is Swastha Sathi, is not revealed,

it's not made public. So, we do not know how many are being conducted or how many are being done to the women under the age of 40. So, it is difficult to assess, how much of this is, was really necessary.

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So this is a problem, it seems, I mean, there are several things that we know, there are many things that we do not know. We know their occupation, they are in the salt water for several hours a day or because their houses are submerged after a cyclone so they have no way of escaping this. So we know they are exposed to salt water, we know that they have very high rates of white discharge and pelvic inflammation and we know that, we suspect that, quite a lot of hysterectomies are being done on women because they have long standing problems of reproductive tract infection. So, all of these together indicate that there is a problem. Of course along with this, I mean, the whole thing is accentuated by the fact that clean water is not accessible in most villages, I mean, it's very difficult. Just for drinking water you have to go several, two kilometers, just to fetch water. And obviously that water you're going to use for your entire family, to drink. You are not going to use it to take a bath. So, the women are forced to go to a pond to have a bath and again they are exposed to salt water. So all of this shows that there may be a link and some of my doctor friends have explained the link. And I think that there is a link between excessive salinity of water and women's health hazard. It may not be absolutely certain but what I find is that there is enough evidence to indicate that there may be a connection. And I think that, serious research has to be undertaken, to study this connection, and if it is indeed a problem then we immediately have to treat women's health problem as a public health problem in these areas and we have to take public health engineering initiatives to get fresh water to women. We have to equip our primary health centers to provide women with the necessary advice and treatment. Because I find that most doctors who are working in these areas, they regard it as a hygiene problem. They think that women are not aware of what to do when they're menstruating or when they're bathing and they just sort of scold the women a lot and give the women a fungal infection cream. That is about all they do. But if there is indeed a connection between hyper-salinity and pelvic inflammation, then we have to rethink, in that protocol of women who live along the side of the rivers in Sundarbans.

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**US:** You did answer my next question, whether there is any government intervention, but it seems we need bigger data and research first.

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**SB:** As of now there is no question of intervention because there is no awareness. Nobody has diagnosed the problem, let alone do something to address it.

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**US:** Did you feel that more women are migrating from Sundarban for work than say 3 or 4 years ago? Or is there a decline in migration?

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**SB:** That is difficult to say because that kind of observation should be based on data. We don't really know how many women have already left, I mean entire families may have left. If we try to understand today, we may not even have enough data, we may not even be able to trace most families. So women leave with their families, women leave just by themselves, women leave and come back. Seasonal migration is also migration. I would say, my own hunch is that, seasonal

migration might be increasing, in the Sundarbans. So, it is possible that a lot of women are leaving to work as farm labourers because their own land holdings are almost uncultivable. They are trying to make some money just through labour. And the contract system of taking labour, you know, a group of labourers from one place to another place, that system is now firmly in place. But whether more women are coming to work as domestic maids or less, we do not know. That could also be a question of opportunity. Right now, there are no jobs. So a lot of women who are staying there right now, may be potential migrant workers, who will leave once the market opens up a little bit. And in my opinion it's not even very necessary to pin point who exactly is leaving and who exactly is staying back. The question is you know, that a substantial number are leaving, we don't have anything for migrant workers, not here, not at the source and not at the destination. So the job, really, is to see that whoever migrates even if 15 people migrate, even if 1500 people, even if 15000 or 1.5 lac people migrate. The thing is what do we have to offer them for their protection?

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So right now, even sending money, you know, is a huge problem so people. The entire process if you look at it, operates on trust. So the same contractors who cheat the farm-labor of their rightful wages, the farmers have no other way but trusting that they will send them the money, to their bank accounts. And they just come back after having worked for four, five months. They just come back and wait for the contractor to send money. If the contractor pays them cash then the workers become extremely vulnerable and easy targets to snatchers. And the police also exploit them mercilessly. They will use any pretext, to slap a fine on them and extract money. So, right now it is about not having an RT PCR, not having a vaccine certificate whatever. So, they're made to pay 500 rupees, 1000 rupees. This is happening at the police level. So, the whole point is that, whoever goes out for work, it's not a crime, it should not be a secret, the state should acknowledge it, that there are migrant workers. And also that after every climate disaster there will be migration. The whole point is to be vigilant and to protect them to be enabling. So, right now, unfortunately that is not done. The state always, for political reasons, tries to show that there are enough work opportunities in the state. And it is almost in a chronic state of denial about migration. We have enough evidence to show that West Bengal is one of the states which is sending a huge number of migrants. And that whenever there will be climate extreme events, there will be more migrants. These are established trends. The state should react reasonably, responsibly and give enough protection and enough rights, rights of citizen, they should ensure that the citizenship rights of every migrant worker especially the women because they are vulnerable in many additional ways. So those have to be taken into account.

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**US:** We are almost at the end of the episode, thank you for your views and sharing your experiences. Is there something you'd like to add for our listeners, vis á vis the climate crisis and women of Sundarban?

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**SB:** One thing I feel very strongly is that we, who do not live in Sundarbans, look at the Sundarbans as an exotic area and indeed it is so. The beauty of the place is breathtaking and the wealth of its natural life, animal life is unique, unsurpassed in most of the world. But because we look at it as tourists, as outsiders, we fail to connect with the people who live in Sundarbans. Their lives are hard, their lives are harsh. And they are the targets of every kind of corruption and mismanagement one can think of. Both in the government sector and also, unfortunately in the NGO sector. Both have been exploiting these people for their own small, narrow profits. I think it is time that we start

listening to the people who live in Sundarban, the absolutely poor people who have to fight the forces of nature everyday, who take a *dingi* (dinghy) and go out into the forests, you know, and taking their lives in their hands, knowing that they might die, they might not actually comeback. So, these are the people who deserve to be heard, we need to hear their voice, and therefore I think that it is from them that we can learn, what we should do for a long term, a medium term or a short term solution. We cannot think of a solution without taking them in confidence.

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**US:** Thank you so much, for joining us today.

**US:** We've just heard how gendered the climate crisis is. Women migrants or women members of male migrant workers' families who stayed behind, face challenges in their daily lives. The saline water, inundating agricultural fields and submerging houses pose a unique challenge to the women. From pelvic inflammation to the uterine tumour, resulting in mass hysterectomy are raising concerns, solutions to which are not available yet. An absence of detailed data-driven research on the public health situation of women of Sundarbans adds to the crisis and provides a sense of impunity and unaccountability to the local health practitioners under whose advice women are undergoing surgeries. Can there be a long term solution to this public health concern? Who will be accountable for this crisis? What can be an immediate solution to this rising concern? A detailed survey on the public health issue of the women of Sunderbans is urgent to unravel the magnitude of the crisis and investigate these pertinent questions.