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Stranded in the Sunderbans

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Rising sea levels and subsequent loss of land are contributing to increasing the number of environmental refugees in the Sunderbans.

Life on the remote inhabited islands of the Indian Sunderbans is far removed from the world of glitzy shopping malls, flyovers, jet-setting middle classes and highflying life that India Shining has come to be exemplified by. In fact, the basic amenities of life are yet to be available for the inhabitants of these islands. Yet, poorest on these islands are paying the price of global warming and rising sea levels as more than 10,000 environmental refugees struggle for survival here.

Power has just come to G Plot and Sagar though electricity is available only for a few hours after dusk. Transport within the islands is by van-rickshaw. Because it is the venue of the Ganga Sagar Mela, Sagar is comparatively better endowed with larger vessels catering to its connectivity with the outside world. But where G Plot is concerned, the block headquarters on Patharpratima island are a full three hours away by motor boat. In Sagar, vessels do not move back to the mainland beyond late afternoon, since the tide changes direction.

Grim scenario

Health services are next to nil. Even where a Block Primary Health Centre (BPHC) is present, which is akin to a 30-bed hospital, the government stipulation of two general practitioners and two doctors is never met. Only general practitioners man the BPHCs. Out of the two doctors, only one is present at any given time, since each attends the hospital for just three days or so in a week. As per a survey conducted by the Human Development Centre under the aegis of the West Bengal Voluntary Health Association (WBVHA), of the 65 sub-centres operating here, which were to be manned by Auxiliary Nurse cum Midwives (ANMs), 15 lack ANMs. In the absence of regular power supply, and hence a cold chain to preserve vaccines, most children remain un-immunised, as Attiar Rahman and Dilip Das, coordinators working with the Human Development Centre, tell me. Small wonder then, that maternal and infant mortality rates are very high in these parts.

Patharpratima is one of the few major islands with power. The block headquarters is located here. There are 15 *grampanchayats* that operate under its aegis. Of these, four are on the mainland, while the rest are on the various islands in and around Patharpratima. Yet, not all of them are equipped with primary health centres. Brajaballahpur, G Plot and Digambarpur (on the mainland) have primary health centres (PHC). But Achintyapur, another large island, does not. Achintyapur is connected with Patharpratima by regular ferries that ply every 45 minutes. But the southernmost point of Achintyapur, K Plot, has just two ferries — one in the morning and one in the evening to connect it with Patharpratima island. Agriculture and fishing are the only two occupations of the people on these islands. Life and livelihoods are totally in keeping with the vagaries of nature. And yet, these densely populated islands are losing 70-100 *bighas* of land annually to pay for the sins of the well-heeled in India and abroad.

Erosion started around these parts some 35 years ago, according to 86-year-old Ratan Mondol, an ex-resident and farmer from Ghoramara. Since then, most of Ghoramara has been swallowed up by the swirling seas. Right now, only a small strip of this once-huge island remains. The major migration occurred 14 years ago, when nearly all the fertile land on the island and homes were swallowed up. Ratan Mondol and his family moved to nearby Sagar, where they were given one and a half *bighas* of land, a pond and a home under Indira Awas Yojana by the authorities. Mondol and his family have been growing paddy on the land, and eking out a living. However, Sagar itself has been experiencing rapid erosion over the last few years, with 100 *bighas* disappearing annually into the sea. "I do not know how long Sagar and people like us will survive," Mondol exclaims. Further down the same road is another colony of refugees who moved in from Lohachhara, which the sea gobbled up in 1982, along with an uninhabited island, Bedford/Suparibhanga. Each refugee here was given five *bighas* of land,



POSSIBLE WAY OUT: A mangrove nursery in the Sunderbans. PHOTO: AFP

without a home. They are generally dependent on fishing, and comparatively better off than the other migrants. But given the dynamic nature of the ecosystem, the rising sea level and the subsidence encountered, there is hardly much hope for any community here.

Vastly reduced in size

The same is the case with G Plot, which is now reduced to one fourth its original size. A part of Patharpratima block, G Plot originally comprised nine villages — Gobardhanpur, Sitarampur, Budobudir Tat, Indrapur, Sattadaspur, north and south Surendraganj. But some 10-12 years ago, Gobardhanpur was entirely swallowed up by the sea. The southern part of Sitarampur has disappeared, while the northern part is slowly getting swallowed up as the land gets eroded by the onslaught of the sea.

Anima and Ashwini Patra owned 16 *bighas* of land in Gobardhanpur. When the sea swallowed up their lands, they had to move north. But now, the family of eight must make do by fishing and doing menial jobs in the fields. Surabala

Das is an old widow who lost 10 *bighas* in Gobardhanpur. Her eldest son fell victim to an undiagnosed fever, and the younger son abandoned the family for better prospects. Her elder daughter-in-law, two grand-daughters and she try hard to survive by begging and doing menial jobs now. Sachindra Patra and his three brothers lost nine *bighas* in Gobardhanpur 23 years ago. "Ours was among the first to be gobbled up by the rising sea", says Patra. Although he has managed to buy some two *bighas* since then, he and his brothers have to work as labourers in other farms to make ends meet. In the cases cited above, the government has given 1.5 *bighas* per family on which to build houses.

Rabin Burman and his wife gaze listlessly at the waters of the Bay of Bengal. Memories are all that are left of their house and land in south Sitarampur lost 15 years ago. None of the Sitarampur residents has received any of the government's largesse, unlike the majority of the Gobardhanpur refugees. Some have been given Below Poverty Line (BPL) cards, but many have not.

"It depends on one's political connections," grumbles Anima Patra.

To be fair to the authorities, relief and rehabilitation are difficult to guarantee, with land in the southern fringes breaking off in chunks in tandem with the rising seas. Besides, another 50-60 acres will be lost with a huge NABARD-funded brick embankment being built by the state irrigation department to stem the erosion being wrought by the sea and adjoining rivers on the southernmost parts. This is also intended to prevent saline sea waters entering paddy fields and rendering them unfit for cultivation, as happened last year.

Would it work?

However, Panchayat Samiti Chairman Haripada Samanta is not too optimistic of the newly-erected embankments holding out for more than four years. "Embankments have been continually built along the sea, but they are easily breached by the surging waters. The only places where they work are where mangroves protect the land." In that case, would he not suggest

regeneration of mangrove belts to prevent the sea from swallowing up the land? "There is no land left for mangrove regeneration. Whatever land could be utilised, is being run over by the sea."

Perhaps, the government could promote salinity-resistant paddy varieties in these parts, so that land overrun by saline water would not be rendered totally infertile. Saline-resistant indigenous varieties are so resilient that they can be cultivated in comparatively high saline soils, as agricultural scientist Dr. Anupam Paul points out. But, the government has yet to promote such paddy in these parts.

Most significantly, it is imperative that communities and elected Panchayat representatives are involved with scientists in formulating a multi-pronged strategy by the authorities to combat the disastrous effects of global warming and rising sea levels in the Sunderbans. Or else, we may be hurtling down an abyss of no return, with the numbers of those displaced surpassing our worst nightmares.