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Man and environment: An ecological history of Sundarbans

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Abstract

The Sundarbans is the largest mangrove wetland in the world. The Sundarbans, one of the largest delta in the estuarine phase of the river Ganga, is an unique bio-climatic zone on a tropical geographical situation in the coastal Bay of Bengal. The earliest reference to this land can be traced back to the epic Mahabharata where the eldest and second Pandava brother Yudhistir and Bhima visited Gangasagar during their pilgrimage. Vayu Puran refers to the flourishing trade and commerce in the region. Ecology is science of relatively recent origin. The dictionaries date the first use of this word in English to the year 1873. It is derived from the Greek word 'oikos' meaning 'house'. German biologist E.H Haeckel (1879) gave a concise definition of ecology. Ecological history meaning study of nature. One must understand that the Sundarbans is an example of an endangered ecological system that is highly populated and both fragile and economically valuable. Thus there is an urgent need to know its history of settlement. Different authors tried to draw different conclusive ideas about the nature of settlements in the Sundarbans from studies of various sites of settlements excavated. The present introduction sets for the background of present research work, which is an attempt to understand the Man and Environment: An Ecological History of Sundarbans.

Keywords: Sundar bans, ecology, environment, Bengal, Bangladesh, Ganga

Introduction

By 'environment' we mean our surrounding or the conditions of life and growth. It also envelops the various kinds of crisis related to water, soil cover, forest etc. In recent years there has been a growing public awareness regarding different forms of environmental changes like green-house effect, global warming, climate changes, rise and sea level and land subsidence. By environmental history we mean "the historically documented part of the story of the life and death not of human individuals, but societies and species, others and our own, in terms of their relationships with the world about them". Thus one can say, environmental history is the study of human relationship and encounter with nature. Environmental scholar, Ramchandra Guha has tried to trace environmentalism with global scope, in diverse ecological and national context. In his book 'Environmentalism: A Global History', he has provided a brief survey of the ideas and movements that have shaped environmentalism around the world. Among today's hotly debated topics, discussions on environment, social ecology and global warming, has come to dominate all other topics. Sundarbans is a region which occupies an active cyclonic zone in the Bay of Bengal, where deltaic formation is still underway, where subsistence is a reality, problem of salinity a natural hazards and lack of fresh drinking water a daily problem.

It is also a region which has witnessed the implementation of the first scientific forest management plan in the world under the British rule and is perhaps one of the last surviving tropical deltaic mangrove forests in Asia, the rest having succumbed initially to paddy fields and later on the aqua-culture.

This automatically makes one aware of the need to immediately focus our attention and resources on this rich and unique eco-habited.

Transformation of Sundarbans during Medieval Period

In the medieval period, conservation of the forest was already taking place with wet rice growing communities opening the forest settlement process. Islam was an important force in this Conservation. Thus although people of the delta had been transforming forested lands to rice fields long before the coming of the Muslims, what was new form at least the 16th century on was the association of Muslim holy men (pir), or charismatic persons popularly identified as such, with forest clearing and land reclamation. In popular memory some of these men swelled into vivid historical figures, saints whose lives served as metaphors for the expansion of both religion and agriculture. Thus a land originally forested and non-Muslim become arable and predominantly Muslim. In fact, between 13th and 18th century Muslim pioneers locally remembered as holy men ont only established the Islamic religion in much of south and eastern Bengal, but also played important roles in the intensification of wet rice and agriculture. As Eaton pointed out "for several centuries after 1200, the Bengal delta saw two frontiers, both of them moving a cultural frontier dividing the Turk and Bengali and an agrarian frontier dividing forest and field."

Leaders in the eastern Sundarbans such as Mehr Ali, who arrived in Jessore from Deccan Plateau during early Mughal peiod, and pir Umar Shah who arrived in Noakhali from Iran in the early 18th century, greatly affected the transformation of the Sundarbans. Pir Umar Shah is said to have lived there in his boat working miracles and making multitudes of converts by whom the wastes were gradually reclaimed. Mehr Ali is said to have come to the jungles of Jessore from the Deccan and assisted the local population in clearing the jungles and in making possible the cultivation of wet rice. The gazetteers of Khulna District,

compiled in 1908, reports that in the early 20th century parts of the Sundarbans forest were still identified with the charismatic authority of Muslim holy men. The Muslim pioneers are believed to have obtained land assignments from authorities in control of forest tracts or were incorporated within the state when the clearing had progressed to the extent where it was capable of generating revenue. Emergence of Bon-Bibi as the presiding deity of the Sundarbans may be attributed to this influence.

Livelihood Patterns in Sundarbans during Colonial Period

Sundarbans was essentially perceived as a remote wildness and wilderness by the British, isolated from the rest of Bengal and from India. Being isolated from the rest of Bengal Sundarbans was unappealing to the British for its lack of access and human habitation. Information recorded on the Sundarbans population is found mainly in the revenue histories, gazetteers and censuses recorded during the British rule. What was written during those times had more to do with the success of the empire in particular areas of India than of those peoples already living there. Most of colonial historiography, the most prominent being Sir, W.W. Hunter's essay published in the Statistical account of Bengal, depicts Sundarbans as wanting in Victorian ideals of a sublime landscape. According to Hunter, densely forested Sundarban region was far from Edenic. It was sparsely populated and teeming with abundant flora and fauna. In fact he asserts that the area was entirely uninhabited, with the exception of a few wandering gangs of woodcutters and fisherman. "The whole population is insignificant". From very beginning of British administration of Bengal, the area was thought more of a nuisance than an advantage, to be drained, embanked and reclaimed for cultivation. The history of land reclamation in Sundarbans during colonial period dates back to 1770 AD. When the collector General Claude Russell planned for utilization of forest land for the purpose agriculture. In 1785 AD. Commissioner of Jessore, Tilman Henckel, with permission of Warren Hastings, distributed land among cultivators. After 1813 AD. The East India Company started to lease out the 'chars' to new zamindars. For the sake of livelihood the bawali, chunery and the labour of salt industry had to be employed to clear the forest for agriculture as directed by zamindars. Regarding the other immigrants to the 24 Parganas Sundarbans, the Bunas, Hunter tells us that they were generally brought into the Sundarbans for the purpose of clearing the jungles. Hunter in his statistical account of Sundarbans has written in details about the 'general population' of Sundarbans. This account is both informative and interesting. According to him, nearly all the inhabitants were either Hindus or Muhammadans, with a sprinkling of Magh, Buddhists, and a few families of native Christians.

Water Resource Management in Sundarbans

The Bengal Delta represents a perfect example of a dynamic fresh-water eco-system. This is characterized by lentic or standing water, lotic or running water and wetlands. Old records refer to lower Bengal as a land of hundreds of rivers and rivulets. As W.W. Hunter wrote, "The Sundarbans may therefore be described as a tangled region of estuaries, rivers and watercourse enclosing a vast number of islands of various shapes and sizes and the whole country is one network of rivers and watercourse". Indeed, from end to end it is a very network of waterways and innumerable tributaries linking the main streams and broad khals.

Pargiter writing 1879 noted that the Sundarbans stretch from the Hooghly on the west to the Meghna, the estuary of the Ganges and Brahmaputra on the east, and comprise the southern portions of the present districts of the 24- Parganas, Khulna and Bakarganj. Rennel's map, prepared in 1779, still forms the basis for studies on the river system of this area. Most of the rivers which generally flow from the north to south, are influenced by tides from the Bay of Bengal.

Conclusion

The Sundarbans has been affected by earthquakes, strong winds, salinity and severe cyclonic storms in the past which have caused widespread devastation to human settlements and have claimed many lives and the loss of much agriculture land. To protect themselves the settlers tried to adapt themselves to these adverse environmental conditions by building embankments and shelters. The harsh environmental realities of Sundarbans has been adapted by them. In the face of growing concern regarding global warming and its diverse results like rise in sea level, more severe cyclonic storms and unpredictable weather conditions, the present chapter becomes more relevant. While one cannot control Mother Nature, one can surely provide other means of protection so that valuable lives can be saved. It is here that a judicious balance has to be struck between scientific developments in the field of disaster management along with eco-friendly measures of disaster relief. All this has to be combined with local as well as governmental participation. Hence, what is required is a respectful balance between accepting nature's destructive power with the use of modern scientific methods of pre-disaster predictions and other modern relief measures.

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