

Various Livelihood Options Of The Marginalized Women Residing In The Sundarbans Delta Of West Bengal

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Sundarbans is situated on the lower end of the Gangetic West Bengal. Sundarbans cover an area of 4262 Sq.kms. Sundarbans are a part of the world's largest delta which is formed by three rivers Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna. Sundarbans is comprised of 54 islands. There are various opinions about the name of the Sundarbans. According to some, in Bengali, the word 'sundar' means beautiful and 'ban' is forest so the natural beauty of the region lead to call it Sundarbans. Then there are those who said that sundar refers to the sundari trees. The other opinion is that is under is derived from the sea or samudra. Sundarbans is a World Heritage Site awarded by UNESCO in the year 1997. It was established as a National Park on May 4, 1984. In the year 1973, it had been designated as Tiger Reserve. The entire Sundarbans area was recognised by UNESCO as a Global Biosphere Reserve in the year 2001.

In Sundarbans there are no borders to divide fresh H₂O from salt-water and men-eating tigers and salt-water estuarine crocodiles rule here for hundreds of years. The vegetation in Sundarbans is totally under the control of amount of salt present in the soil. The surface soil is composed of molluscs, larvae of insects etc. the forest of the Sundarbans is so dense that daylight scarcely penetrates the thick forest where walking is not possible also. Some of the famous trees of this forest are as follows:-Sundari, Tora, Kaora, Bain, Garan, Hental, Golpata, Garjan etc. Even the fauna of the Sundarbans are very rich in species. The animal life in Sundarbans is also associated with its mangrove forest, salinity, muddy etc. The most famous is the tigers of the Sundarbans who are the nature's masterpiece creation. The intelligence agility turned this magical beast into a legendary myth. Thus, we can say that Sundarbans is famous for tigers on the land and crocodile in the water.

Majority of the people live in the forest fringe villages of Sundarbans consider agriculture as the main source of livelihood, but due to monocropping nature of agriculture a large number of people are depended on the forest and forest based products. Among them, the women living in the forest-fringe villages of the Sundarbans are mostly

deprived. Majority of the women living in these villages are marginalised economically as well as socially. They are also related with forest based activities like prawn-seed collection, grab-collection, fishing, golpata collection etc. The inhabitants basically the women are very poor because most of them are refugees. They migrate from different parts of other states and settled in Sundarbans. At present Sundarbans donot have any access to the grid connectivity and solely depended on the solar biomass. The solar power is the main source of electrification in the forest-fringe villages of the Sundarbans. Besides this, the money collection is the considered to be a very important occupation, but the women of Sundarbans are not allowed in this occupation because this is totally a male dominated occupation and moreover they are considered physically unfit for this occupation. As a result these marginalized women are engaged in fishing based activities. Their courage is manifested in their daily battle against the nature. The above mentioned professions are very dangerous and risky because these women ends up being the victim of the tiger. Even the rivers fail to provide them comfort. Apart from the flood and storms which occur all throughout the year, these women are always weary of crocodiles. As a result these women also performed kumirbrata, a folk ritual aimed at appeasing the giant reptiles. Although coastal and estuarine fishing and prawn-seed collection engage most of the workforce of Sundarbans comprising men, women and children. Although these forests are dangerous for the people who reside in Sundarbans are considered the sole source of livelihood for these marginalized women. This fact made them intensely superstitions and prejudiced in nature. They are confident that their safety and protection depended entirely on supernatural agency. None of them mentioned into the forest without a puja for Banabibi. In various areas of Sundarbans, there are different types of gods which are worshipped by them like Manasa, Sitala, Dakshin Rai, Gazi etc.

Some of the important livelihood options for these marginalized women of Sundarbans are mentioned below in details –

Wood-Cutting –

Although govt. has already banned wood-cutting still many inhabitants are engaged into this activity. They collect the wood from deep inside the forest. They generally collect wood from the Goran, Keora, trees etc. Goran tree is profitable to them. During this time, they have to keep a watch on the forest for the ferocious tiger. Many people became the prey of tiger during this time. Although government has already banned wood-trade, but wood-trade was the most flourishing trade of Sundarbans.

Fishing in the Sundarbans is regarded as the second important economic activity among the marginalized women of Sundarbans. There are various rivers and creeks in Sundarbans which have tidal saline water. Here in Sundarbans the rivers and khals are abound with fish. A large number of marginalized populations in Sundarbans are directly or indirectly dependent on fishing for their livelihood. These women are basically engaged into prawn-seed collection from different rivers and creeks like Bidyadhari, Matla, Piyali, Kalindi, Canning River, Raimongal etc. throughout the year. They sell these prawn-seeds to the owners of different Bheries and Fisheries. They start collecting prawn-seeds from dawn till afternoon. They used net made up of nylon sieve by fixing it with a strip of bamboo to catch the tiger-prawn seeds. During this process these women have been attacked or killed by the salt-water estuarine crocodiles, man-eating Royal Bengal tigers.

There are many people in Sundarbans who have been killed by the tigers because Sundarbans tigers are believed to be most mysterious and ferocious among all the animals. According to Blanford (1891) 4,218 people were killed due to tiger attacks over a six year period from 1860 to 1866 in the forest of the Sundarbans. Over the years, there has been a gradual increase in the number of workers in the forest. The tiger attacks are frequent in the Chamta, Matla, Dobanki, Netidhopani, Sudhyanakhali, Jharkhali, Colos etc.

Folklore played an important role in the cultural life of the people of the Sundarbans. It was the reflection of their lives and activities as well as of thoughts. Although these forests of Sundarbans are very dangerous but these women consider it as the sole source of livelihood and this fact made them intensely superstitious and prejudiced by their belief in forest spirits and Goddess Banabibi. They were confident that their safety depended entirely upon supernatural agency. None of the wood-cutters, honey-collectors, fishermen ventured into the forests without a puja for Banabibi. Besides Banabibi, they also worship different folk deities like Barakhan Gazi, Kalu, Manasa, Sitala etc.

CONCLUSION

We can conclude by saying that Sundarbans forests are well endowed with natural resources which can be utilized for generating sustainable livelihood for these villagers of the Sundarbans. Throughout their lives they have to struggle a lot for their survival. This situation has been continuing from time immemorial. Thus for the maintenance of ecological balance of the Sundarbans, the original natural features of Sundarbans are very important.

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