

Tiger Widow and Sea Widow: The Tragic Story of Destitute Wives of Vulnerable Fishermen Community of Indian Sundarbans Mangrove Forest, a UN Heritage Site

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Abstract

Sundarbans is the world's largest delta and home for large numbers of wildlife animals including the endangered Royal Bengal Tiger. The exploitation of this area has increased as human dependency on forest resources is increasing. Consequently, human-tiger conflict in recent years also increased and in most of the cases, the victims are the male members. The saddest part is that women whose husbands are killed by tigers are stigmatized as "Tiger widows," and seen as portents of bad luck. In addition to highlighting the numerous hardships endured by "Tiger widows," this article offers insights into alternate sources of income that could improve the lives of this unfortunate woman and the Sundarbans' vulnerable fishing community.

Keywords: Alternative livelihood option, Human-wildlife conflict, Indian Sundarbans, Tiger widows

Introduction

Sundarbans mangrove is the world's largest delta (Figure 1), formed by the confluence of rivers Ganga, Meghna and Brahmaputra, and shared by both India and Bangladesh. This delta is home to numerous endangered species, including the Royal Bengal Tiger, and has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site (Justin and Ghosh, 2022). Its rich biodiversity (including flora and fauna) plays a pivotal role in the national economy. Once upon a time, the Sundarbans were the heavens with only a limited number of people catching fish from the banks of the Vidyadhari, Matla and other rivers. The livelihood of many people was through agriculture. Due to the intrusion of salt water into agricultural fields, a large number of people lose their ancestral cultivation and rice fields have been replaced with shrimp culture over time. Due to frequent river erosion, the people started to leave agriculture from the early 90s. Marginal farmers became landless and farmers and agricultural workers became unemployed. A significant section of the populace took up fishing as an alternate source of income. However, the buffer area's fish catch is decreasing as a result of intense fishing, and fishermen are moving into the core area. In order to gather honey, they



Figure 1: Mangrove forest in Indian Sundarbans

also venture into the core region (Figure 2). Tiger habitat in this ecologically delicate area has shrunk as the Sundarbans' water becoming salty (Mukherjee and Sarkar, 2024). The exploitation of resources has increased more as human dependency on forest resources has increased due to the factors such as loss of jobs during the lockdown, return of the migrant workers and various environmental stressors. As a result, human-tiger conflict has escalated in recent years (Dhar and Mondal, 2023).

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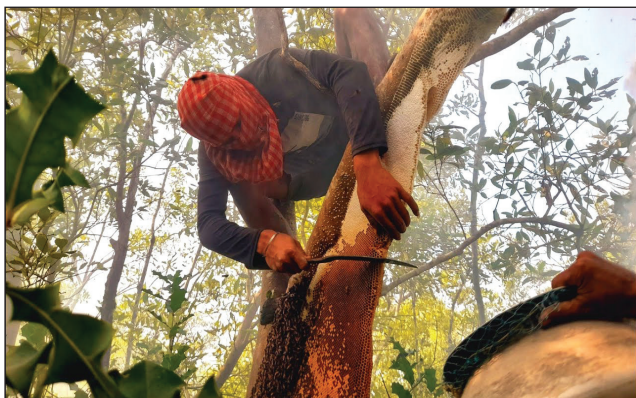


Figure 2: Honey collection into the core-forests in the Sundarbans

Fishermen who catch fish from a boat are not at risk of being attacked by tigers. Most fishermen, however, target large crabs because of their high market value, which can reach 800-1000 rupees per kilogram. In order to catch crab, fishermen must disembark from the boat, and they are at risk of being attacked by tigers (Figure 3). In most of the cases, the victims are the male members. And the saddest aspect is that women whose husbands are killed by tigers are stigmatized as “Tiger widows,” shunned by society, and viewed as portents of bad luck (Chowdhury *et al.*, 2016).



Figure 3: An illusive Bengal tiger in Indian Sundarbans (Photo: Sujit Chowdhury/ CIFRI India)

Sea Widows

People in the Sundarbans region are aware of the “Tiger Widow”. In comparison to ‘tiger widows’, the ‘sea widows’ have remained hidden. The term “sea widows” refers to women whose husbands went fishing in the sea and never returned. But ‘sea widows’ is not an officially recognized category. Though the weather forecasting technology has been improved now-a-days, the number of accidents in sea in the Sundarbans shows no signs of reduction. Due to the decline in the fish catch in rivers and creeks of Sundarbans, fishing trawlers are increasing day by day and also entering in shore area. Fish trawling started in the 1990s, but only across certain areas of the sea. Due to the decrease in fish availability on the coast, small fishermen are also compelled to venture into shore or deeper waters without large nets or advanced motorized/ mechanized vessels. Consequently, fishermen lose their lives while fishing in the deep sea as

a result of natural calamities or accidents and their wives automatically become prematurely widowed. The widowed women face a traumatized life as it is difficult to get government assistance if a fisherman dies at sea without a fisherman’s identity card and sometimes encountered with social disorders.

The Immediate Blow of Societal Trauma of Tiger Widow

Sea level rise, natural disasters and human-animal conflicts make the lives of these ‘tiger widows’ in a miserable condition in the trap of environment, culture and mental health. The ‘responsibility’ of losing her husband’s life at the hands of tiger has to be carried by this woman for years and sometimes they named as ‘*Apaya*’, ‘*Kulta*’ *etc.* and assumed it to be the negligence in the fulfillment of the wife’s commitment. Many communities have cherished this superstition for centuries. Thus, after the death of the husband, the tiger widow has to bear all the responsibilities. These tiger-widow women are being mentally oppressed along with marital problems. Cultural stigmas attached to these tiger widows worsen their suffering; with the loss of their husbands, they lose their social security, economic security and well-being.

One superstition holds that fishermen are disobeying the ‘*Bonbibi*’, a forest goddess and guardian spirit of the Sundarbans and that tiger attacks are a form of divine retribution (Figure 4). Even though, in this region many widows are there who lost their husband’s lives due to snake bites, crocodile attack or other natural ways like disease and accident. It is only ‘tiger widows’ who are affected by this social stigma. In many cases, they face social barriers to accessing the boat in spite of their skilled fishing ability. Sometimes it is very difficult to get compensation to the deceased’s family members because fishermen illegally enter the core area.



Figure 4: Goddess *Bonbibi*, mother to humans and tigers

Tiger Widow Lives with Precarious Economic Struggles

Due to lack of awareness and limited access to resources, women in Sundarbans live a miserable life. The majority of the 'tiger widows' are illiterate and unskilled labour, they have very few opportunities for employment and face serious financial difficulties. Many 'tiger widows' do not receive compensation for the death of their husbands. Out of fear they are not venturing again into the forest and choose some form of jobs like labour-based jobs and employed as migrant workers in urban areas. Some of them are looked after by family members and some have to earn their daily needs by begging but fervently hopes for better work options. In a few cases, they have been employed as servants in a well-off family. As they are considered evil or cursed, very few are willing to employ them, and they are underpaid. Due to these unusual jobs, they are forced to collect prawn seeds from nearby rivers which is also damaging the Sundarbans ecosystem. However, their earnings from a variety of jobs are still far less than what they could get by going into the forest, and sometime they are forced themselves to enter the core area and are exposed to tiger attacks (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Woman engaged in fishing activities in Indian Sundarbans

Dilemma in Getting Compensation

There are various compensation schemes from the Government departments for the victims of tiger attack. Additionally, they are also expected to receive assistance from the insurance schemes. In order to receive compensation, certain legal documents must be submitted to the government departments. It is necessary to obtain permits from local forest officials in order to enter the core area of Indian Sundarbans. Fishermen must have their Boat License Certificate (BLC) and permission from the forest department with him at the time of death as well as the death must not occur in a wildlife protected core forest area. Locating the deceased person and the autopsy report are crucial. The dead body is sometimes washed away into the sea when the high tides subside, and getting compensation became extremely challenging. Since villagers are only permitted to enter the buffer zone and are strictly prohibited from entering the core area, the issue is exacerbated when someone passes away in the forest's core, whether or not they have a pass with him. Many of these deaths go unreported because the victims don't want to be harassed. Villagers frequently fail to report fatalities for fear of fines or license cancellation.

However, due to decline in fish resources in the buffer zone area, fishermen are entering into the core area of mangroves

(Figure 6). Moreover, the fish and crabs they caught in the core area are highly valued. The government only grants a small number of BLCs, not everyone can afford it due to expenses involved to get the permits. Sometimes it is also difficult for the fisherman also to understand arbitrary demarcation of buffer/core area and this demarcation is carried out in an unscientific manner without adhering to the regulations.



Figure 6: In the absence of alternative livelihood opportunities, fishermen ventured into the core-area of Sundarbans

Sometime though the insurance company agreed to pay compensation but the non-availability of NOC documents from the department of forest (as the fisherman venture into the core area), the insurance companies are not able to provide the compensation. In many cases they are misguided, and many women are unaware about the process. Some of them have given up hope for compensation because of the vicious cycle. Although, there is anger over non-receiving the compensation, no major movement ever took place. Another reason is also social disorder. The situation is the same for 'sea widows' as if a person who dies at sea and does not have a fisherman's identity card; it is difficult to get government assistance. Moreover, no help came from the owner of the trawler as sometimes the owner of the trawler might also face the accident if he ventured into the sea with the fishermen.

Alternative Livelihood Option for Betterment of Vulnerable Fisherman Community of Sundarbans and for Widows

Government intervention is important to cope up with this human-wildlife conflict and work has to be initiated to dispel religious superstitions. Efforts should be made to rehabilitate these distressed women through alternative livelihoods. Various government agencies along with NGOs are providing training to them for bee-keeping, poultry-farming, tailoring, knitting, machine embroidery, stick-manufacturing, sweet making etc. for their economic self-sufficiency. However, training should be economically viable in the long term, and it must be ensured that they will get a proper market to explore their skill. For fishermen, alternative engagement in fish farming is necessary which will not save the small fisher, but also save the women from the societal distress. Fisherman credit cards need to be made available to small-scale fishermen. The government should create regulations that are both flexible and supportive for fishermen in order to preserve forest resources and fishermen's livelihoods.

Conclusion

It is very important to aware the fisherman not to venture into

the core area of the Sundarbans forest. But the alternative easy employment opportunity is crucial, otherwise being aware also, they will venture into the Sundarbans core for their survival and become vulnerable to tiger attacks.

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