



International Research Journal of Interdisciplinary & Multidisciplinary Studies (IRJIMS)

A Peer-Reviewed Monthly Research Journal

ISSN: 2394-7969 (Online), ISSN: 2394-7950 (Print)

ISJN: A4372-3144 (Online) ISJN: A4372-3145 (Print)

UGC Approved Journal (SL NO. 47520)

Volume-III, Issue-V, June 2017, Page No. 321-328

Published by: Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711

Website: <http://www.irjims.com>

Sustaining and Empowering the Tiger and Crocodile Widows of Sunderban Aea of West Bengal

Shilpa Nandy

Assistant Professor of Political Science, Khudiram Bose Central College, Kolkata, India

Abstract

With tigers in the forests, crocodiles in the waters and almost largely dependent human habitation on the fringe, Sunderban have acquired a tradition of man- animal conflict. Tens of thousands of people enters the forests, waters for fishing, honey collecting and firewood gathering. Tiger and Crocodile attacks are common incidents persisting since the inception of colonization of Sunderban. Thus the mangrove tiger lands, one of its kind on the planet and declared by UNESCO as Heritage Site has given rise to unique and ongoing social problem not experienced any elsewhere in the globe ---- that thousands of women widowed by tiger or crocodile attacks over the years.

These women suffer a great deal of problems due to sudden death of their husbands by the attacks of the wild animals. Then starts unending days of suffering from penury and deprivation due to the loss of their male members in the family. Immediate sustenance becomes a major issue on losing the earning member of the very poor family. So time has come to rethink by all segments of society for these women who are already been marginalized and deprived from all segments of the society and are fighting for their right to life and livelihood Therefore this paper would like to address the following key points:

- *Problems and adversities face by these poor, marginalized impoverished women who have been victims of the wild attacks.*
- *Developing self-empowerment and self-reliance among these women*
- *Role played by the Government and Non- Government Agencies in empowering and institutionalizing a support system for them and for their survival*

Keywords: Tiger and Crocodile Widows, Empowerment, Sunderban, Marginalised, Sustainable, Development

While tigers are becoming extinct in India through poaching and corruption, in the wilds of the Sundarbans, the beautiful, yet dangerous delta between India and Bangladesh, they kill someone every other day. Suryatapa Bhattacharya, Foreign Correspondent. (February 13, 2012)

“Mamata Mandol followed every tradition, every prayer, to save her husband. She did not light a fire under the stove. She did not wash her clothes. She did not cross rivers. She stayed in her one-room hut of mud and straw for two weeks, and prayed to the forest spirits for his safe return. But Bapi Mandol never came home. When the boat returned early from the fishing trip, the villagers of Sonaga knew someone had died. Someone from one of the five families who had people aboard the fishing boat. Mamata knew.”

The Sundarbans lies in the massive delta between India and Bangladesh. This is one of the most beautiful but most dangerous places in the world, a place of tigers and crocodiles and dangerous seas and canals. Mamata is just one of about 3,000 "tiger widows" in the Sundarbans.

With tigers in the forests, crocodiles in the waters and almost largely dependent human habitation on the fringe, Sunderban have acquired a tradition of man- animal conflict. Tens of thousands of people enters the forests, waters for fishing, honey collecting and firewood gathering. Tiger and Crocodile attacks are common incidents persisting since the inception of colonization of Sunderban. Thus the mangrove tiger lands, one of its kind on the planet and declared by UNESCO as Heritage Site has given rise to unique and ongoing social problem not experienced any elsewhere in the globe ---- that thousands of women widowed by tiger or crocodile attacks over the years.

These women suffer a good deal of mental trauma due to the sudden killing of their husbands by ferocious predators that, more often than not, do not even give them a chance to see the mortal remains of their loved ones. Then starts unending days of suffering from penury and deprivation due to the loss of the earning male head of the family. Immediate sustenance turns out to be the major issue on losing the earning member of a very poor family. As such sustaining the initial days of shock and instability calls for primary assistance.

Therefore, this research paper would like to address the following key points like:

- Adversities and challenges these women have to face in sustaining their live and livelihood and how they are being marginalized and being victimized by all segments of the society.
- Developing an understanding of and sensitization on the problems of tiger or crocodile widows of Sundarban among all concerned, especially Government Departments and agencies.
- Developing self-empowerment and self-reliance among the tiger or crocodile widows of Sundarban and the role played by Dakshin Banga Matsyajibi Forum, Kolkata.
- Institutionalization of a support system for the thousands of tiger and crocodile widows of Sundarban constituted with these widows themselves;

Challenges faced by the Tiger and Crocodile Widows: A research study conducted by the West Bengal Government's State Health System Development Project funded by World

Bank for widows of tiger victims, scars and stigma linger, finds the following major problems faced by these widows are :

- 1. Mental Trauma:** Tiger widows are blamed for their husbands' death by the family and community and that "90% of the widows had been accused of causing their husband's death by their family in-laws, especially by the mothers-in-law" while being branded as "**swami-khego or husband-eater**". Physical abuse by the in-laws is common, particularly by their mothers-in-law (17%–31.5%) and by neighbours (6%–11.1%), said the study.
- 2. Social and Community's Rejection:** The lives of the widows who have to not only deal with the bereavement of the sudden and violent loss, but also the cultural stigma associated with being killed by a tiger and social rejection. At the heart of this cultural stigma also lies the belief of the population in the area that the mangrove forest is a sacred entity — the abode of Goddess Bonobibi — and the tiger is the guardian deity of the forest, under the name of Dakkhin Ray (Lord of the South). Tiger attacks, consequently, are perceived as a "**divine curse**" or "**sign that the goddess is displeased, even enraged with the victim and denies protection from the tigers**". Widows suffer from a sense of "guilt and sinfulness" that impacts their "post-trauma psychology" while the community's rejection of the widows as a "cursed family" further "acts as a magnifier for the compounded stigma burden when added to their already precarious status as widows".
- 3. Lack of Financial Support:** The study reported that for 86% of these group of women including their children, their in -laws family do not take any financial responsibility after the death of their husbands and as a result they become the victims of exploitation and abuse and are being discriminated and marginalized by the society. Even the insurance company and government officials are generally reluctant to make it possible for the victim and his family to access the insurance and compensation amount. All these account for almost no realization of compensation or insurance claims on tiger or crocodile accidents.

Sensitization on the Problems and Role played by the Government Agencies: Legal and administrative procedures with bureaucratic apathy constitute as one of the big hazard. These are necessary to get a legal record of the incident and /or death or injury. This in turn is indispensable to process compensation and insurance claims. The complications involved in procuring the same are evident in the following lines –

Entry into core area of the forest is totally prohibited, while entry into the buffer is prohibited without a valid licence and permit. The licence regime is totally unjust. It was imposed in the 1980s without any consultation with or need assessment of the fishing communities. As the need outstripped the supply the licences are illegally rented for Rs.40,000/- to Rs.50,000/- in the tiger reserve area and for Rs.10,000/- to Rs.15,000/- in the reserve forest area. The poor fishers have to venture into the prohibited waters, with or without licence. If the tiger or crocodile attack occurs there they generally do not report the incident in fear of legal proceedings against them.

Even if they report, legal records are generally very difficult to procure. The poor family members have to run from pillar to post. Mostly illiterate and ignorant of the procedures and without resources to sustain this arduous process, generally they succumb to despair and do not pursue their claims.

Besides, another important problem is the rehabilitation of these helpless tiger or crocodile widows. There is no government scheme for them. They get no preference in accessing the existing government schemes for the poor. They are treated just as another poor family.

Developing Self Reliance and Self Empowerment and Role played by Daakshin Banga Matsyajibi Forum (DMF): The concept of ‘Self Reliance’ is sometimes confused with ‘Self-Sufficiency’. Self-sufficiency simply means that a country need not depend on other sources to fulfill the needs of its citizens and enterprises. That the country produces all the goods and services it requires without depending on others. Self-reliance, on the other hand, implies that the country generates sufficient surplus to buy what it needs and therefore, it does not have to bank upon the loans and aids of outside organizations or countries for resources or funds to acquire them. Our country has been blessed with a bounty of natural resources which is being exploited for self-reliance. Luckily, the private sector has been successful in making the country self-reliant in agricultural products, fishing sectors, textiles, steel, computer software, fertilizers and heavy industries. We have reached the extent of having surplus production in several sectors and able to earn necessary foreign exchange.

But it is being sad to state that in all these foreign exchange earnings, both men and women are equally playing a significant role but when the question of women development comes in, the picture is very negative. Women are the most marginalized sector of the society, and the fisherwomen are the extremely neglected, marginalized and deprived community in India and the tiger and crocodile widow’s are the worst victim of this community. Therefore, the society needs to think and rethink about their self development and self employment so that they can sustain their life with full honour and dignity.

In this context, the role played by the Dakshin Banga Matsyajibi Forum, a registered trade union of the fisher folk is worth mentioning. They are continuously mobilizing these groups of tiger and crocodile widows of sunderban areas. They are arranging several awareness campaigns and rallies for them in their own areas like Gosaba, Patharpratima, Sajerkhali, Kultali Blocks and like. They are trying to generate self reliance among these women folk. They also are actively placing deputations and petitions of their demands like pensions, compensations, insurance etc to the local, state and at national level government for their legitimate rights and benefits and for several welfare oriented schemes. The DMF are also trying to help these women in forming their own self help groups or co-operatives. It is believed that self reliance can be possible only if self employment for these women can be ensured. Therefore it is of great need that our planners of the society should think and rethink for their development and upliftment so that their right to life and livelihood can be saved and peace, social justice and democracy can be restored.



Deputations of the Tiger Widows of Sunderban Area of West Bengal

Photo Courtsey: Dakshin banga Matsyajibi Forum, received by the author through email on 18.03.2017

Institutionalization of a support system by these widows: Another major issue which needs to be addressed is that there should be a strong network and institutional support system working in the socio – economic status and empowerment of the tiger widow and crocodile widows. There are few institutions who are working in upliftment and development of these communities. They are as follows:

- 1) **A Tiger Widow Organisations**, Voluntary, Not-For-Profit organisation, registered in Ireland by the Revenue Commissioners under the Charities Act - Registered Number CHY1542. They are dedicated to helping communities that are badly affected by **Tiger and Crocodile Attacks in Sundarbans, India**. They have been able to facilitate a change in livelihoods; giving peoples a choice to stay out of the dangerous forest areas. Thus they are saving lives and saving the tigers. Each year there are men killed while fishing or gathering wood and honey inside the reserve leaving widows to fend for themselves and their children. The likelihood of their remarrying is very slim. Tiger Widows Organisation facilitates the formation of **Self-Help-Groups** to enable families to survive without going to dangerous forest areas. Therefore they prevent attacks and really save lives. They can be visited at **www. tigerwidows.org**
- 2) **Digambarpur Angikar:** They are the partner organizations of Tiger Widow Organisations. They are community non-for-profit organisations who concentrate on Self-Help-Groups, Women’s Rights, Women’s Empowerment, Prevention and

awareness of Human Trafficking, Enabling education and training etc they can be visited at www.angikar.org

- 3) **Sunderban Tiger Widow Welfare Society:** They are established in the year 2003. They help the families of tiger and crocodile victims family in following ways:
- i) When a person is killed by tiger or crocodile / shark we visit the families immediately. Help them with cash & provision. Give two female goat or pig (sow) for regular income generation
 - ii) Arrange and give medical help to the members of the grieved family
 - iii) Help the children in education.
 - iv) Take the tiger widow in the self help group (SHG) for our upcoming project of alternate livelihood- eg Integrated fish – poultry farming, pig & goat farming, organic vegetable farming etc.
 - v) Train the widows in different livelihood projects sponsored by Govt and others eg poultry farming, goat farming, pig farming, fishery, tailoring, furniture making, dairy milk production, umbrella manufacturing etc
 - vi) Highlight the plight of Tiger widows to the national and international authorities for assistance and longtime solution in developing alternate livelihood projects which will bring some monthly income to avoid collection of minor forest produce of Sundarban
 - vii) Help the tiger widow in getting official compensation by filling the application with associate documents and following the application till end (The compensation is available from – Tiger reserve, Fishery Department, Insurance company if proper permits are available which is missing in most of the cases as the illiterate villagers are illiterate, ignorant and can't comply the permit procedure governed by cheats.)
 - viii) Advice the fringe community people to get proper permits in going to the forest – Boat license certificate (BLC) , fishing or honey collection permits, accident insurance etc
 - ix) Organizing awareness program in the fringe community to shift to the alternate trade available in distance places and get education and training
 - x) Internationalize the issue of plight of tiger widows including World Bank, World heritage center UNESCO, MFF, different authorities saving of forest and environment for human existence. Research papers predict 10 % damage to the Sundarban is caused by Human encroachment. So helping the tiger widows in alternate livelihood away from forest id direct help to preserve the forest.
 - xi) Appeal to national & International authority, organizations, individuals for helping the tiger widows in organizing food for hunger, medical & educational help and developing the projects' in alternate livelihood. They can be visited at: **www.tigerwidows.in**

Besides, the financial institutions like banks, co-operatives and local self government institutions, forest officials and fisheries department of the state must come forward more

actively in empowering these women economically and they should be included in the decision making process in their areas.

Recommendations:

The following recommendation can be put forwarded in sustaining and empowering the tiger and crocodile widows:

1. **Trauma Management:** to ensure that the widow and her family get over the shock and are in a position to pursue necessary livelihood and other activities;
2. **Immediate Sustenance:** to ensure that the widow and her family can survive the initial days of instability immediately after the accident and can pursue the activities called for including livelihood activities;
3. **Legal & Administrative Procedure:** to ascertain that the legal and administrative procedures necessary for recording the accident and getting compensation and insurance money are pursued properly;
4. **Recovery of compensation and Insurance money:** to ensure that the compensation and Insurance money are actually received by the widow of the victim and remains under her control;
5. **Rehabilitation of widow and family:** to see that the widow and her family achieve some relatively stable livelihood option for their long term sustenance.

Need of the Hour:

1. Preparing a data base for tiger/crocodile widows and the scopes and procedures to realise insurance and compensation claims.
2. Developing a **Centre for Assistance** at Canning with **contact points** at Hingalganj, Gosaba, Basanti, Kultali and Patharpratima.
3. Organising a **Task Force** to contact, record and also to initiate and follow-up assistance procedure.
4. Forming **Tiger/Crocodile Widow Committees** to access both entitlements and livelihood opportunities.
5. Moving administrative, human rights and legal grievance redress mechanisms.
6. Drawing the attention of civil society to these helpless women living in most wretched condition.
7. Accessing both governmental and non-governmental resources to **institutionalize** the assistance procedure.

It has been a fact that traditional fishing communities in India have always remained geographically, economically, socially and culturally marginalized. The mechanization of the fishing industry further accentuated the poverty and social backwardness of the community. It is true that there is a discrimination against fisherfolk communities in all walks of life despite the provision of their constitutional guarantees and especially the tiger and crocodile widows are worst affected. The traditional attitude of our society does not encourage women to utilize their human potentials fully. They are not ranked according to

their capacity to do particular job due to sex, caste and kinship. The major challenges faced by rural women are illiteracy, lack of vital information, fear to take risks, lack of experience and training, feeling of insecurity, rampant corruption, lack of infrastructure, lack of finance etc In addition these are structural constrains in the form of inequality, limited purchasing power, condemnation by local elite and like. Although the principle of gender equality is enshrined in our constitution which guarantees equality to women, and empowers the state to adopt measures of positive determination in favour of women for removing the cumulative socio-economic, educational disadvantages face by them. Within a framework of democratic polity, our laws, developmental policies, plans and programmes have aimed at women's advancement in different spheres.

The planners of our country should take firm steps and enforce suitable policies so that the traditional rights and livelihood of the poor, neglected , impoverished , discriminated and marginalized widow's of the fishermen who were the victims of wild attacks while fishing or hunting or gathering woods or collecting honey can be properly safeguarded. Development should take place from governmental as well as at local levels so that they can susutain and live their life with honour and dignity.

Thus we all know that empowerment is a process of awareness and capacity building leading to greater participation. to greater decision making powers and control and to transformative action. The goals of women empowerment are to challenge patriarchal ideology, to transform the structures and institutions reinforce and perpetrate gender discrimination and social and economic inequality and enable poor women to gain access to control over both material and information resources. In this sense, empowerment basically refers to the process of raising women status by way of promoting economic, social, political and local empowerment. So time has come to rethink and address the unheard, neglected and marginalized tiger and crocodile widow's voices should be raised properly and they should be given recognition, rehabilitation and respect from the society and thereby restoring social justice, peace and human rights. The relevance of this research paper precisely lies in this.

References:

1. Aniruddha Ghosal, *Sunderbans study: For widows of tiger victims, scars and stigma linger* (The research was funded by the World Bank through the West Bengal government's State Health System Development Project, February 24, 2016, Kolkata.
2. Suryatapa Bhattacharya, *The Tiger Widow's of Sunderban, Foreign Correspondent, February 12, 2013* (www.google.com), accession dt: 18.3.2017
3. www.tigerwidows.org
4. www.tigerwidows.in