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Sajal Roy

# Climate Change Impacts on Gender Relations in Bangladesh

Socio-environmental Struggle of the Shora  
Forest Community in the Sundarbans  
Mangrove Forest



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# Preface

## **The Wrath of this Tempest: Disasters, Human Security and Gendered Relations**

The ecologies of our lifeworlds are not simply externalities or background features of social life, as many modern accounts would have it. Rather, lived ecologies are part of the grounding condition of our social being. We are all embedded in changing ecologies. For parallel reasons, human security should not be treated as an add-on to core security concerns such as military and state security. Human security is so much more than a few ‘complementary’ factors such as food security, economic security or personal security, as the *modern* notion of ‘freedom from want’ would describe it (Cameron 2014). Rather, bringing ecologies and security together, embedded human security should be the basis of thinking about all security, including disaster management.

In this book on the indigenous people who live with the Sundarbans mangrove forest of coastal Bangladesh, the words of the people cry out for such an integrated understanding of both ecology and human security. Theirs are the words repeated by many indigenous peoples as, across the globe, they live complex intersecting lifeworlds. Customary ecological embeddedness meets with traditional cosmologies and modern incursions of knowledge. The forest is, in *customary* terms, ‘our lives, our future and our love’. Or as another Shora person expressed it, the mangrove forest ‘is like my son or daughter. Our existence is inconceivable without it’. But the forest is also, in *traditional* cosmological terms, ‘the almighty God [who] would protect us from the wrath of this tempest’, and, in *modern* terms, it is ‘our natural oxygen factor’ and source of vitamins. Expressed in modern geographical measurement, the Sundarbans forest is the worlds’ largest tidal mangrove zone of 10,000 km<sup>2</sup>, crossing the nation-states of Bangladesh and India, part of the Ganges River Delta on the Bay of Bengal. This modern ‘ecological resource’ is the subject of much research and international development and conservation work, with four million Bangladeshis directly dependent on it for their livelihoods. This book gives us much more than that.

In this place of the Sundarbans, different ontologies meet each other in a contradictory tangle of engagements. Rising above that complexity, it is clear, as Sajal Roy documents, that the forest—the Sundarbans—is more than just the background context for people’s lives. It is the place that constitutes the Sundarbans’ peoples in all their complexity. In Marisol de la Cadena’s words, the Sundarbans is another kind of *earth-being*: a named entity called upon and variably made present to us in the inter-relationship of social life.

As a logical extension of these two points—first, that the forest is not simply a background context to this story, and, second, that human security is an all-embracing consideration—the third point becomes clear. Disasters cannot be treated as simply the outcome of extreme environmental events. Disasters are not natural; they are social. The cyclones of the Bay of Bengal are no exception. Cyclones Sidr and Aila do not have the same ontological presence in this book as the Sundarbans, but at the level of the customary they are also *earth-beings*. Their contradictory presence of fear and wonder is constantly felt as something more than just the proximate source of disasters measured on the Beaufort scale. In other words, a disaster is not simply a natural event or the inevitable outcome of a force of nature. Disasters should rather be understood as the outcome of social pressures: too many people living in a region which makes livelihoods precarious; lack of support for adaptation to changing climatic conditions; poor infrastructure in managing the relationship of social/natural life, etc. All these multiple causes *in conjunction with* a natural event affecting extreme impact mean that a cyclone can be called a ‘disaster’. Turning our heads to look behind us, we can say that when extreme environmental events occur in places either where humans do *not* live or where the population and their infrastructure are well prepared, the events are *not* usually called ‘disasters’. And humans, tigers, crabs, trees and cyclones certainly live together in this place of intensifying disasters.

Climate change—another key theme of this book—hides this third point. As conditions of climate change act to intensify the impact of natural events such as cyclones and droughts, we all begin to think of it as nature striking back at us. And the people of the Sundarbans are no exception. When the Shora villagers invoke the Sundarbans as their protector from the ‘wrath of this tempest’, they are using the same language as religious-inflected modern poets, though without the individualistic and heroic overtones of romantic modernism: ‘Alone in those wild storms where hardest deeds are done’ (Percival 1823). Climate change now makes us all vulnerable, and no people more so than the poor (particularly women living with precarious livelihoods). This is intensified for those who have become marginalized in a market-framed society. Here, both women and men are increasingly exposed to natural events as never before. Even the greater connection that men have to the capitalist market does not help them. By focusing on Bangladesh, identified as one of the most climate change-affected countries in the world (Kreft et al. 2017), and in framing the subject of this book as gender relations in an indigenous community, Sajal Roy is telling the story of the most vulnerable people in one of the most vulnerable places in the world. The Sundarbans is a place of changing integration

with nature alongside modern exploitation of place, corruption and rapacious marketeers. It is an important story.

Penrith, Sydney, NSW, Australia  
December 2018

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# Abbreviations

BBS	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics
CFCs	Chlorofluorocarbons
CIFOR	Centre for International Forestry Research
FAO	Food and Agricultural Organization
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GAD	Gender and Development
GoB	Government of Bangladesh
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
MoEF	Ministry of Environment and Forest
n.d.	No Date
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNEP	United Nations Environment Program
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UP	Union Parishad
UV-B	Ultraviolet B
WB	World Bank
WHO	World Health Organization
WWF	Worldwide Fund for Nature