NOTE

# Trespassers in Their Own Land

## Pradip Chatterjee writes :

SUNDARBAN IS UNIQUE. Sundarban is the largest prograding delta on this planet formed at the estuarine phase of the Ganga– Bramhaputra river system. It is the largest estuarine mangrove forest and the only mangrove tiger land on the globe.

Sundarban mangrove forests with more than 60% of total Indian mangrove cover, being the largest nursery for fish and shell fish are responsible for the coastal fishery of the whole of eastern India.

The Sundarbans constitute an area of 26,000 sq km, of which just 9,630 sq km is in Indian territory and the rest in Bangladesh. The forest covers 10,000 sq km of which about 6,000 are in Bangladesh. The Indian component constitutes 106 islands, of which 54 are inhabited, located in 13 blocks in 24 Parganas South District and six blocks in 24 Parganas North District, with a population of 4.2 m.

Sundarban boasts around 172 species of fishes, 20 species of prawn and 44 species of crabs including two species of edible crabs. A large population is dependent on fishery activity and fisheries are treated as the backbone of Sundarban's economy.

Sundarban harbours multiple conservation regimes. As of today, it has a National Park, Tiger Reserve, Reserve Forest, UNESCO World Heritage Site and a Biosphere Reserve. The conservation measures have miserably failed to stall the deterioration of natural resources. Mangroves are perishing, fish stock is decreasing. On the other hand, these measures, particularly the restrictions on fishing and collection of minor forest produces associated with tiger reserve and national park (concurrent with the core area of tiger reserve), have brought untold sufferings to the traditional fisher people of Sundarban. The traditional fishers used to fish in all the rivers and creeks of Sundarban for generations. In 1973 introduction of tiger reserve imposed severe restriction on fishing in the 2,585 sq km of its area out of which 1,300 sq km (core area) was prohibited for fishing. In the rest 1,285 sq km (buffer area) only 923 manual boats were issued license for fishing. Given the ever increasing pressure on population this was grossly inadequate. But the fishers did not feel the scourge of restriction as there was profuse fish in the waters lying outside the tiger reserve.

With diminishing fish stock fishers had to venture more and more in waters lying within the tiger reserve and there they experienced a shock. Fines, seizure of boats, nets and catch, cancellation of permits, threats of imprisonment, abuses and even physical assaults greeted

them in the waters where their ancestors fished freely. The fishers of Sundarban are treated as trespassers by the forest guards in their own land.

The conflict witnessed development of fishers' organisations and their continuous struggle for livelihood rights. Rallies, dharnas, meetings, submission of memoranda. Then the struggle of the forest dependent people of India made the parliament pass the Forest Rights Act of 2006. The Wild Life Protection Act of 1972, the legal instrument for imposition of tiger reserve, was also amended in 2006 with reference to the Forest Rights Act. These acts upheld the right to habitat and livelihood of the forest dependent people. The Wild Life Protection (Amendment) Act of 2006 clearly states that the rights of the forest dependent people must be recognised before imposition of mutually agreed restrictions associated with tiger reserve.

But, in India, acts favouring the people are seldom implemented unless pushed by people's movement. Forest Rights Act of 2006 and the Wild Life Protection (Amendment) Act of 2006 are not yet implemented in the Sundarbans.

The suffering of the fishers in Sundarbans continues and with it continues their struggle for restoration of their rights over their own land. 'Sundarban Matsyajibi Joutha Sangram Committee' (Sundarban Fisher People Joint Struggle Committee) affiliated to National Fishworkers' Forum (NFF) has become the rallying centre of struggling traditional fishers in the Sundarbans. □