

### **Concept note on migrant laborers of sinking islands of the Sunderbans – by Sukanta Sarkar**

The Sunderbans, a cluster of low-lying islands in the Bay of Bengal, spread across India and Bangladesh, is an active delta region measuring about 40,000 sq km area covered with wide swathes of rare mangrove vegetation. This is also an ecologically fragile and climatically vulnerable region that is home to over 4.5 million people.

But successive studies in the past two decades have shown the precarious rise of sea level in the region that has forced the coast to retreat at a fast pace. In a study conducted in 2012, by the Zoological Society of London found out that the Sunderbans coast has been retreating up to 200 metres (660 ft) in a year. This has led to destruction of 17,179 hectares (42,450 acres) of mangroves within three decades (1975–2010) to accommodate agricultural activities; shrimp cultivation had destroyed another 7,554 hectares (18,670 acres).

Researchers from the School of Oceanographic Studies, Jadavpur University, estimated the annual rise in sea level to be 8 millimetres (0.31 in) in 2010. It had doubled from 3.14 millimetres (0.124 in) recorded in 2000. The rising sea levels had also submerged around 7,500 hectares (19,000 acres) of forest areas. This, coupled with an around 1.5 °C (2.7 °F) rise in surface water temperatures and increased levels of salinity, have posed a problem for the survival of the indigenous flora and fauna. The native Sundari trees are exceptionally sensitive to salinity and are being threatened with extinction.

Loss of the mangrove forest is likely to result in the loss of the protective biological shield against cyclones and tsunamis. This may put the surrounding coastal communities at high risk. Moreover, the submergence of land mass has rendered up to 6,000 families homeless and around 70,000 people are immediately threatened with dislocation. As a result there's been flight of human capital to the mainland--about 13% in the decade of 2000–2010. A 2015 ethnographic study, conducted by a team of researchers from Heidelberg University in Germany, found a crisis brewing in the Sunderbans. The study contended that poor planning on the part of the India and Bangladesh governments coupled with natural ecological changes were forcing the flight of human capital from the region.

Rise of sea level and submergence of cultivation fields in saline water due to cyclones like Aila and high tide, people of the Ghoramara, Mousuni and different islands have lost their land and homes. Lohachura island has already vanished under the water. After most parts of the Ghoramara and Mousuni islands disappeared thousands of people were forced to leave their villages. They migrated to Kolkata, Durgapur, Siliguri, Delhi, Jaipur, Ahmedabad, Baroda, Maharashtra, Kerala, Tamilnadu, Karnataka. However, these people, known as Climate Refugees, still have an address in these islands. These farmers-turned-migrant labourers now work in the construction sector, hotels, restaurants and other industries. Some of them have turned into rickshaw pullers, street vendors and garbage collectors in many cities and towns in the country.

During the lockdown due to pandemic in April, 2020, thousands of such migrant labourers from different parts of India had to come back to their homes in these islands in the Sundarban delta.

I would like to study the current status of the Migrant Labourers of Sundarbans, particularly in Ghoramara, Sagar, Patharpratima and Mousuni islands. According to my sources, from these areas some thousands of migrant labourers have migrated again to their old workplace after the lockdown restriction was lifted. However, there are many hundreds who lost their jobs and are stuck at their native places looking for local jobs.

To trace these people and know the details of their lives and livelihood in the Sunderbans I will have to travel and meet them in these islands. This requires quite a few visits to the above-mentioned places to collect the information, data and oral history through a number of interviews of these people.