Chapter Two

HISTORY OF SETTLEMENT AND ADAPTATION TO THE HARSH ENVIRONMENTAL REALITIES OF SUNDARBANS

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2 HISTORY OF SETTLEMENT AND ADAPTATION TO THE HARSH ENVIRONMENTAL REALITIES OF SUNDARBANS

2.1 Introduction

The Sundarbans, one of the largest delta in the estuarine phase of the river Ganga, is an unique bio-climatic zone on a tropical geographical situation in the coastal Bay of Bengal. The region has long been one of India’s last frontiers, an uninhabitable thicket of mangrove swamp land separating the expanding Indian population from the Bay of Bengal. But Sundarban’s past is shrouded in mystery. The earliest reference to this land can be traced back to the epic Mahabharata where the eldest and second Pandava brother Yudhistir and Bhima visited Gangasagar during their pilgrimage.¹ The Vayu Puran refers to the flourishing trade and commerce in the region ² and old Bengali literature speaks of settlements among swamps visited by ships from abroad. One must understand that the Sundarbans is an example of an endangered ecological system that is
highly populated and both fragile and economically valuable.\textsuperscript{3} Thus there is an urgent need to know its history of settlement. Many believe that Sundarbans was at least inhabited during the earlier phase of Holocene, by the groups of people who made and used stone tools. Since then the area witnessed the fall and rise of dynasties and experienced both human and natural devastations time and again.\textsuperscript{4} However, it is well established that due to a series of natural calamities the region was gradually losing its population during the middle ages. One thing is certain, that the conversion of forested land into rice paddies began long before the Muslim Indo-Turkish sultans ruled Bengal.
2.2 Existence of Civilizational type Settlement in Sundarbans

Romantic speculation identified the vast swampy terrain as the site of a lost civilization. Different authors tried to draw different conclusive ideas about the nature of the settlements in the Sundarbans from studies of various sites of settlements excavated. Ruins of early settlement have been discovered in the form of coins, temples tanks, huge docks and ports, brick ghats in isolated parts of the forest and in one or two localities brick–kilns too were discovered. Europeans like Beverage, Gastrel, Westland and Hunter have expressed doubt as to whether the Sundarban was ever heavily populated and well cultivated. According to Beveridge the available evidence indicated the presence of sparsely populated pockets, there in inhabitants struggling against the elements and hazards posed by wild animals. Thus the inhabitance did not enjoy any kind of urban existence. Rennell’s map shows that between 1764-72 very little and was under cultivation and scarcely any reclamation work. Gastrel strongly held the view that the Sundarbans never enjoyed any civilized
population and that the settlements were too small and scattered to justify any such tales from the past. \(^8\) Westland who had also made this point while writing about Jessore noticed the impermanence of some of the settlements. \(^9\) These writers pointed out that evidence clearly suggested that large quantities of salt were manufactured at Sandwip. This militates against the view of extensive cultivation, for salt could not have been made without the great expenditure of fuel and this naturally implied the existence of large tracts of jungle. \(^10\) Even Hunter wrote that there can be no doubt that settlers did occasionally appear in the Sundarbans in olden times, but there is nothing to show that there was ever a general population in the Sundarbans lower than the present limits of cultivation. \(^11\) Thus the Westerns historians are unanimous in there opinion that no civilization worth the name had ever existed in the Sundarbans.

On the other hand Indian authors like Satish Mitra and Kalidas Dutta are of the opinion that settlement and civilization in the Sundarbans were of the highest order. Satish Mitra argues that island of Sandwip at that time produced salt in huge quantities and it could annually load as many as 200 ships. Also, people of both higher and lower orders inhabited the place and manual labor was done by
the lowers orders who were called Chandabhandas. Therefore, the debris of civilization can still prove the glorious days of the Sundarbans with a population of civilized people.\textsuperscript{12} Besides the Portuguese map of India in Paris (drawn in 1698) shows five famous ports in Sundarbans area-Pacaculy /a pargana in 24 Parganas, Cuitpataz /Khilafatabad associated with Khan Jahan Ali Khan, Dapara /Daspara ,Noldy/Nalua and Tipera/ Tripura. This clearly proves that Sundarbans at that time extended upto Chittagong.\textsuperscript{13} Intact the study of the ruins of ports and temple suggest that 200 years ago the riverbanks were teeming with activity. The relics discovered belongs to the Maurya ,Gupta, Pala and Sena periods.\textsuperscript{14} The most important place from where these archaeological findings have been excavated in and around lower Bengal are Chandraketugarh, Harinayanpur , Deoulpota Atghetha , Sita kundu etc. Chandraketugarh, especially proved to be a treasure trove of archaeological findings from the pre- Maurya to the Gupta period.\textsuperscript{15} The terracotta seals and coins with ship motifs indicate the Chandraketugarh was a flourishing coastal town from 4th BC-6th AD having trade contacts with foreign countries. \textsuperscript{16} Thus the archeological evidence clearly indicates that the Sundarbans were inhabited long ago.
2.3 Reasons Behind the Decay of Settlement

While on one hand the existence of early settlements is evident in Sundarbans, the decay and impermanence of human settlements is also a reality in the history of settlement in the Sundarbans prior to the colonial period. Various reasons have been cited for this decay of population. Rennell in his atlas of Bengal, Sheet No XX, 1761, marked the entire Southern part of the Bakarganj District as “Country depopulated by the Maghs”. This depopulation, contends Bhattasali, was due to the ravages of the Magh and Portuguese pirates who during the first half of the 17thc swept the of Sundarbans region clean of human habitation and consigned the entire area to rank vegetation, aided by the gradual subsidence of the Delta.\(^\text{17}\) The people, raiding for slaves and booty along the ‘Rogues River’, were not just marauders but settlers from Arakan across the Bay of Bengal,\(^\text{18}\) who came as agrarian migrants depopulated the land and together with the Portuguese pirates became an additional scourge which as well as dacoits. They were fearless in nature, who penetrated the forests and began cultivating the soil to grow rice. In the process they also the original inhabitants had to suffer. They came to
settle but retained their ethnic identity - half Buddhist, half - Muslim without any degree of higher civic discipline and perhaps used slave labour for clearing the jungle for cultivation. Thus Khadi – Visheya or mandal, a flourishing district in the Sena period (12th c), which later became a dense forest and the region between Bishkhali and Rabanabad, were depopulated by the Maghs.

Colonel Gastrel in his Revenue Survey Report on the District of Jessore, Faridpur and Bakarganj recorded evidences of buried forest of Sundri trees. A writer in the Calcutta Review of 1859 (The Gangetic Delta) also gives another evidence of such submerged forest from Canning at the head of the Matla. All this clearly prove that there had been a subsidence in the lower part atleast if not throughout the entire deltaic region. Even Bhattasali has noted that places of antiquarian interest have disappeared from view in these regions owing to a great subsidence of the whole of Lower Bengal, which took place during the middle of 6th c AD. Thus this fact of subsidence has been utilized by some historians in trying to account for the depopulation of the once thriving area of the Sundarbans. Even L.R. Fawcus agrees that the remains of palatial buildings and temples
not only in newly reclaimed land, but actually many miles within the muddy mangrove swamps of the reserved forests, clearly indicates that once populous Sundarbans became uninhabitable owing to earth subsidence.22

Still another view brings in the devastating action caused by the cyclonic and the irresistible storm waves that might have compelled the inhabitants to quit the Sundarbans for a safer region northwards.23 But Thomas Oldham noted that there is no necessity to resort to any fancied effects of cyclone – waves, of the inroads of pirates or the persecution of other peoples, to account for the occurrence “at the present time of ruins in the Sunderbans”. It has been pointed out that the first necessity for the existence of man is the presence of drinkable sweet water. Where this commodity cannot be procured, it is certain that man cannot make any settlement and it is equally certain that the removal or destruction of the sources of supply of this necessary element of existence will compel him to abandon his abode and even change his habitation.24 Rennell’s Atlas published in 1781 AD showed a number of villages on the east bank of the Kaburtuk and south of the Coirah rivers. These villages were also
shown in the map of Morrieson (1811). But, interestingly, Dampier, Commissioner of the Sundarbans deputed to mark off the forest boundary, found that these villages were deserted. He ascertained from the neighboring inhabitants “that the cause of this desertion was the salt water”. The country became perfect forest and hardly distinguishable from the oldest Sundarbans. Even the revenue survey found it impossible to penetrate the jungles to lay down the old forest boundary. O’ Malley too cites the instance of Gobra, a village on Kobadak, which was once prosperous when the river was active and maintained its health and agriculture and also supplied good drinking water. But it was soon decaying along with the decay of the stream and was fast being deserted by the inhabitants. Hence Thomas Oldham points out that “cyclone – waves and persecution and robbery do not drive men from their abodes near the seaboard now, though they may cause vast destruction of property and produce great suffering…. unless combined with the far more general and more unavoidable compulsion of the want of water”.27
2.4 Islamization, New Harmony and Sundarbans

Reclamation

In the medieval period, conversion of the forest was already taking place with wet rice growing communities opening the forest for settlement purposes. Islam was an important force in this conversion. Thus although people of the delta had been transforming forested lands to rice fields long before the coming of the Muslims, what was new from at least the 16thc on was the association of Muslim holy men (pir), or charismatic persons popularly identified as such, with forest clearing and land reclamation. In popular memory some of these men swelled into vivid mythico–historical figures, saints whose lives served as metaphors for the expansion of both religion and agriculture. Thus a land originally forested and non-Muslim became arable and predominantly Muslim. Persons armed with rights from the state to settle land and extract rent, and professing the Islamic religion, moved to support the process of land reclamation and settle populations involved in wet rice cultivation. In fact, between the 13thc and 18thc Muslim pioneers locally remembered as holymen not only established the Islamic religion in much of south and eastern Bengal, but also
played important roles in the intensification of wet rice agriculture, established new modes of property rights and contributed to a fundamental altering of a natural, forested ecosystem. \(^{29}\) As Eaton points out that “for several centuries after 1200, the Bengal delta saw two frontiers, both of them moving- a cultural frontier dividing the Turk and Bengali and an agrarian frontier dividing forest and field”. (Human Settlement and Colonization in the Sundarbans:1200-1750)

Leaders in the eastern Sundarbans such as Mehr Ali, who arrived in Jessore from Deccan Plateau during early Mughal period, and Pir Umar Shah who arrived in Noakhali from Iran in the early 18thc, greatly affected the transformation of the Sundarbans. Pir Umar Shah is said to have lived there in his boat working miracles and making multitudes of converts by whom the wastes were gradually reclaimed. Mehr Ali is said to have come to the jungles of Jessore from the Deccan and assisted the local population in clearing the jungle and in making possible the cultivation of wet rice.\(^{30}\) The gazetteer of Khulna District, compiled in 1908, reports that in the early 20thc parts of the Sunderbans forest were still identified with the
charismatic authority of Muslim holy men. Wise wrote of Mubarra Ghazi, a legendary pir identified with clearing the Sundarban forests of the 24 Parganas.

Eaton has pointed out that so far as the Sundarbans are concerned, the link between the deeds of the Sufis, and the process of colonization is first seen in the life and legend of Khan Jahan Khan (d 1459) the patron saint of Bagerhat in Khulna, near the edge of the Sundarbans forests. According to local tradition collected in 1870, he had come to the region to reclaim and cultivate the lands in the Sundarbans, which were at the time waste and covered with forest. His remembered accomplishments include clearing the local jungle preparatory to rice cultivation, converting the local population to Islam and constructing many roads and mosques in the area. Khan Jahan was clearly an effective leader, since superior organization skills and abundant manpower were necessary for transforming the region’s formerly thick jungle into rice fields, and also the land had to be embanked, the forest to be cleared, tanks had to be dug for water supply and storage, and huts had to be built for the workers. When these tasks were accomplished, rice had to be planted immediately, lest a reed jungle soon return. These were all arduous
tasks, made more difficult by the ever present dangers of tigers and jungle fevers. Surveys have credited him with having built over 50 monuments around Bagerhat. In short, Khan Jahan is remembered not just as a forest pioneer, but as a civilization builder in the wildest sense. Other saints like Zindah ghazi, an important pir or Muslim holyman was regarded in the late 19thc as a protefor for the woodcutters and boatmen all over the eastern delta. It is interesting to note how frequently these forest pirs, both legendary and historical, bear the title Gazi, a word traditionally associated with Islamic warriors fighting against non-Muslims. In its usage in late medieval Bengal, however, the term conveyed the notion of struggle and mastery to the forest itself, or, as in the case of Zindah Gazi, to the dangers of the forest as represents most dramatically by the Bengal tiger. This preoccupation with taming the jungle, its persistence in the legends of Bengal, and its specific association with the “mastery” aspect of the Islamic ethos, represented an earlier phase of Islamization in the Bengal forest, a phase when a struggle against tiger and trees was still vivid in the collective memory of the people. Later after forest was cleared and the people became entirely wedded to the land as rice cultivators the ethos of Islam seems to have shifted from one of
mastering the forest and its beasts to one of mastering the earth and making its soil productive.\textsuperscript{36}

The Muslim pioneers are believed to have obtained land assignments from authorities in control of forest tracts or were incorporated within the state when the clearing had progressed to the extent where it was capable of generating revenue. The reverence of forest – clearers continued into the Mughal period as the locals continued converting the Sundarban forest to wet rice fields and were heavily influenced by the Muslims around them. Even the Hindu Bengali castes living in Sundardans prior to the Muslims, the Pods in the west and the Chandals in the east were strongly influences in their livelihoods by such figures. Emergence of Bon Bibi as the presiding deity of the Sundarbans may be attributed to this influence. Even Bengali to literature of the 17thc are full of legends of these pioneering pirs. Epic poem Ray – Mangala, composed by Krishnaram Das in 1686, concerns a conflict between a tiger god named Dakshin Ray and a Muslim named Badi Gazi Khan.\textsuperscript{37} In sum, from the 16thc to 20thc, Bengalis have kept alive memories of charismatic pirs, whose authority rested on three overlapping bases: their connection with the forest, a wild and dangerous domain that that they were believed to have
subdued; their connection with the supernatural world, a marvelous powerful realm, with which they were believed to wield continuing influences; and their connection with mosques which they were believed to have built, thereby, institutionalizing the cult of Islam.
2.5 Population and Livelihood Pattern in Sundarbans during the Colonial Period

Sundarbans was essentially perceived as a remote wildness and wilderness by the British, isolated from the rest of Bengal and from India. Being isolated from the rest of Bengal Sundarban was unappealing to the British for its lack of access and human habitation.\textsuperscript{39}

Information recorded on the Sundarban populations is found mainly in the revenue histories, gazetteers and censuses recorded during British rule. What was written during those times had more to do with the success of the empire in particular areas of India than of those peoples already living there. Most of colonial historiography, the most prominent being Sir W. W. Hunter’s essay published in the Statistical Account of Bengal, depicts Sundarbans as wanting in Victorian ideals of a sublime landscape. According to Hunter, densely forested Sundarban region was far from Edenic. It was sparsely populated and teeming with abundant flora and fauna. In fact he asserts that the area was entirely uninhabited, with the exception of a few wandering gangs of woodcutters and fishermen. “The whole population is insignificant” \textsuperscript{40}
From the very beginning of British administration of Bengal, the area was thought more of a nuisance than an advantage, to be drained, embanked and reclaimed for cultivation. The history of land reclamation in Sundarbans (during colonial period) dates back to 1770 AD when the Collector General Claude Russell planned for utilization of forest land for the purpose of agriculture. In 1785 AD, Commissioner of Jessore, Tilman Henckel, with permission of Warren Hastings, distributed land among cultivators. After 1813 AD, the East India Company started to lease out the ‘chars’ to new zamindars. For the sake of livelihood the bawali, chunery and the labour of salt industry had to be employed to clear the forest for agriculture as directed by the zamindars. In fact a large number of labourers were engaged to clear the dense forest and to reclaim the marshy lands for making it habitable and here the skill of the tribals in clearing virgin forest and in bringing land under the plough came to be utilized by the Zamindars. The bulk of the population of the Sundarbans was derived from the Districts immediately on the north. We know that many indigenous people from the Santal pargana and Ranchi joined in the queue of forest clearance for the zamindars.
The English Indigo planters brought some indigenous people working in the indigo factories to these places. Besides, many people from 24 parganas, Jessore, Khulna, Bakarganj came to Sundarbans for the attraction of fertile land. After 1831, Titumir’s followers migrated from Sarfar – ajpur – Kushdaha Pargana to the Sundarbans and Farazi movement motivated many to migrate to Khulna and southern part of Barisal. Even Hunter points out that the principal immigrants to the 24 Parganas Sundarbans are “Uriyas from Cattach and other parts of Orissa, and Bunas from Chotanagpur or Western Bengal”. He explains that they originally came as malangis, or salt manufacturers and as woodcutters. But since the abolition of the government Salt Monopoly, many of these men have scathed down as cultivators in various parts of the 24 Parganas Sundarbans. A colony of them was located on Sagar island. They had brought their wives and families with them and they may be looked upon as permanent residents. They intact “make good husband men, are generally thrifty and some of them are rich men”. The ‘Uriya’ immigrants intermarried only among themselves, and did not amalgamate with the native population.
Regarding the other immigrants to the 24 Parganas Sundarbans, the Bunas, Hunter tells us that they were generally brought into the Sundarbans for the purpose of clearing the jungles. Their wives and children accompanied them and many of them had settled down permanently as cultivators on their own account. Hunter goes on to add that the only immigrants in the Sundarbans of Eastern Bakarganj were the Maghs from the Arakan coast. This newly imported Maghs were a strong hardy and manly race, generally honest and truth speaking. They lived together in little villages, or clusters of wooden houses raised on posts, 8 – 9ft above the ground. Both the men and women were very industrious, neat and clean in their clothing, but dirty in their domestic habits. Hunter notes that the men were excellent woodmen and tillers of the soil. The commissioner of Sundarbans points out that in the early days of Magh immigration, it was their custom to seek out some little secret creek leading into the heart of the forest, where they would form a location, clear the jungle and cultivate the land. The reason for this was to “secure immunity from the payment of revenue”. But this practice was abandoned as very little jungle land remained in the Bakarganj Sundarbans for them to hide in. It has been pointed out that the Maghs
did not amalgamate with the Bengalis and they kept themselves entirely apart from the rest of the population, although many of them had passed the whole or greater part of their lives in the Sundarbans. Hence they could hardly be looked upon as permanent settlers.  

Hunter writes that the "population is increasing gradually, the increment being most entirely continued to the western parts of the Bakarganj Sundarbans. Little or no increase of the population is perceptible in the low-lying marshy tract of the Jessore Sundarbans". Thus his main point was that Sundarbans immigrant population derived from the adjoining districts on the north was gradually increasing. He notes that no emigration takes place from the south, with the exception of the few Maghs who have acquired a competency and who return to their own homes. Thus, in a nutshell, different groups of people came to the Sundarbans from different places for different reasons. Like the Mundas who came here as seasonal labourers to clear forest for agriculture for the zamindars. Intact they started coming to the Sundarbans some 200 – 300 years back during Raja Pratapaditya’s time and the flow of migration continued between mid 16thc – 17thc.
Hunter in his Statistical Account of Sundarbans has written in details about the ‘general population’ of Sundarbans. This account is both informative and interesting. According to him, nearly all the inhabitants were either Hindus or Muhammadans, with a sprinkling of Magh Buddhists (in Bakarganj Sundarans) and a few families of Native Christians. The Hindu resident population consisted of low Sudra castes, who lived by cultivation woodcutting and fishing and hardly a single man belonging to the higher cases was to be met with. The Hindu castes with their occupation included (1) the Napit, barbers and
cultivators who were few in number and in the middling circumstances, (2) the Kaibartta, the cultivators and fishermen who were few in number and in the middling circumstances, (3) the Kapali, cultivators and petty shopkeepers, who were neither numerous nor few and generally belonged to the middling circumstances, (4) Pods, cultivators, fishermen and occasional woodcutters who were numerous and belonged to the middling circumstances (5) Chandals, cultivators and occasional woodcutters who were also numerous and in middling circumstances (6) Jalia, cultivators and fishermen; few and generally in the middling circumstances (7) Bagdi, cultivators who were numerous but some were in middling circumstances while most of them were poor (8) Tior, cultivators, labourers and fishermen who were few in number and generally poor (9) Dhoba washemen and cultivators who were very few in number but belonged to the middling circumstances (10) Jogi, weavers by caste, but employed in the Sundarbans as cultivators, money lenders and petty general dealers who were very few in number but very rich (11) Suri, originally wine distillers and setters, but now cultivators, very few in number and mostly rich (12) kaora, cultivators and labourers who also reared and sold pigs and were few in number and poor.
Describing the Muhammadans of the Sundarbans, Hunter wrote that they belonged to the Sunni sect. They were reported to be “tractable and quiet cultivators” in 24 Parganas and Jessore Sunderbans but in Bakarganj section and a part of eastern Jessore, the Muslim population mostly belonged to the reformed Farazi sect and were “turbulent and litigious” although not “actively fanatical”. The Muslims of Sundarbans, according to Hunter were generally divided into three classes— the shaikhs, who were cultivators and woodcutters and who were numerous in number. Few of them were rich while the majority belonged to the middling circumstances and others were poor. The Sayyids, cultivators who were very few in number and were both rich and poor. The Pathans, cultivators who were also very few in number and belonged to the middling circumstances. There were also other outcaste or gipsy tribes who professed Mohammedanism but were not very “scrupulous” in following the tenets of the prophet. They included the (1) Mirshikaris, hunters and fishermen who sold fist, thread needles, fish hooks and other little odds and ends. They also held lands which they cultivated and were generally well-to-do people. (2) The Sapurias, snake
catchers and charmers who were generally poor. (3) Bediya, quack doctors, who professed to cure toot aches, rheumatism and all sorts of aches and pains and were generally poor.

As to the native Christian population, Hunter wrote that they were all cultivators and their general condition was the same as that of the other peasantry. They were mostly in the middling circumstances and according to the Agent to the Port Canning Company returns, the native Christian population on the estates belonging to the Company were 102 souls, including men, women, and children. We also come to know from Hunter that during his time there were no towns in the Sundarbans. The only exception was Port Canning, on the Matla river, which possessed a municipality. But it too was declared closed during Hunter’s time. In 1870, the town contained 386 houses or huts and a total population of 714 souls. The chief trading villages were Chandkhali, Morrelganj, Bishkhali and Kachua, but these were situated on the north, within the regularly settled parts of Jessore and hence did not belong to the Sundarbans. The villages in the Sundarbans proper were very small, as well as few in number and consisted merely of a cluster of cultivator’s huts.47
Besides, the condition of the people was, on the whole, prosperous and according to the Commissioner it “continues to improve”. Hunter notes that abundance of spare land and the scarcity of labour were sufficient protection to the cultivator against oppression on the part of the grantee. In Sundarbans, there existed both poor as well as comparatively rich peasants but, according to Hunter, “where there is plenty of land to spare, the few cases of poverty among the cultivating class result from folly and idleness, not from misfortune or oppression.”

But one must understand that unlike the 24 Pargana Sundarbans (lying between Hugli and Jamuna river), in the Bakarganj Sundarbans (which is more fertile) the peasantry, as a rule, “are prosperous and free from debt.” But in the eastern part of 24 Pargana Sundarbans and the Jessore Sundarbans, “the smaller cultivators are generally more or less in debt.”

The transformation of the forest into cultivated land also signified a shift from fishing as the main livelihood for local communities to cultivation. The Pods and the Chandals were fisherfolk by livelihood. But the immigration of Hindu cultivators and the emphasis of the Muslim leaders upon cultivation resulted in converting
these fishing castes to agricultural ones. James Wise in 1883 noted that the Muslims considered fishing to be a lowly occupation because of its historical association with non-Muslim and outcaste tribes, who never became integrated into the Muslim society around them. In fact it was not only the Muslims that preferred the farmer to the fisher, Hindu sentiments towards fishing and agriculture paralleled those of their Muslim neighbours; thus farming became the chosen profession. The need to raise revenues through taxation of rice harvest, which could be more easily done than the fish catch of the local populations, could have been a factor in the role of the state in supporting the extension of cultivation as the major livelihood of the people of the area. The cultivators product, grain, could easily be converted into cash, which the government could tax. On the other hand, being incapable of easy storage, the fisherman’s product was not as easily taxed. Moreover, lagoons previously laden with fish gradually dried up, as the major rivers washed deposits of silt down-stream. As a result, many of those who had earlier depended upon fishing for their livelihoods increasingly turned toward cultivation over fishing. This preference for cultivation over fishing continued into the British rule of Sundarbans. The life of the fisherfolks of Sundarbans.
was always in danger and the catches were often uncertain. For this they had a strong belief in supernaturalism. Infact the many rituals and taboos that have been created, surrounding them, are all good indications of the insecure lives the fishermen of Sundarbans have always led.

The fact that the forest resources were in the realm of the common pool and also that the demand for wood, especially firewood was so great, offered ample inducement to cultivators and fisher folks, even when comparatively well off, to follow the wood-trade in Sundarbans. These people were the lower orders of Muslims and the following castes among the Hindus: the Pods, Bagdis, Kaoras, Tiors, Chandals, Kaibartas and Kapalis.\textsuperscript{51} Hunter in his Gazetteer on Sundarbans has written extensively on the wood trade of Sundarbans. He quotes from Westland’s District Report on Jessur — “The regular woodcutters live for the most part just north of the Sundarbans; and when the rains have ceased, their season begins. A body of them start in a native ship for the Sundarbans — far south and near the sea….A party usually consists of ten or fifteen men, some of whom are always of the Bhawali, or regular woodcutting caste….During the four months they are absent, they cut the wood, rough-hew it, and bind it
into rafts….These regular expeditions are undertaken chiefly for the purpose of procuring the larger kinds of wood, suitable for posts, boat building, etc; but they, as well as the occasional woodcutters, also float up large quantities of smaller timber to be used as firewood. The occasional woodcutters include a very large number of the cultivators living within the Sundarban limits, or just beyond them. If they have any spare time, as often happens….they take a boat, go down to the Sundarban forest, cut a cargo of wood, and bring it up for sale”. We also come to know that the principal seat of the wood trade is Chandkhali, where the woodcutter meet the traders, who in turn buy it and carry it to Calcutta, or up the Kabadak to the villages and sugar factories on its banks.\textsuperscript{52}

We also come to know from Hunter that all the woodcutters are very superstitious and believe in the existence of number of forest spirits. None of them goes into the forest to cut wood unless accompanied by a Fakir, who is supposed to receive power from the presiding deity – who is propitiated in turn with offerings – over the tigers and other wild animals. Occasionally a large number of boats proceed together in a party, taking a Fakir with them and sometimes the Fakirs take up their posts on certain lots, and the
woodcutters go out to them. Before starting work in any allotment, the Fakir assembles all the woodcutters of his party, clear a space at the edge of the forest and erects a number of small tent-like huts, in which he places images of various forest deities, to which offerings and sacrifices are made. This ceremony ensures the allotment free of tigers. If any woodcutter of a party is carried away by a tiger, the Fakir decamps, and the woodcutters place flags at the most prominent corners of the allotment to warn off all others. Each Fakir receives a share of all produce removed from the lot he patronizes, which is generally commuted to cash. Hunter categorically tells us that it is a fact that without receiving the protection of one or other these Fakirs, no man will enter any of the allotments, “so great is their belief in the efficacy of the protection afforded.” These Fakirs were very sharp and intelligent, and have great influence over all the woodcutters, of whatever caste, engaged in collecting forest produce. In this context we must note that other people who depended on the Sundarban forest resources like mat-maker, Nalvas by caste (who did not usually dwell within the Sundarbans, but made trips southwards in the cold weather), the honey and beeswax collectors—all pursued a dangerous and uncertain livelihood.
2.6 Conclusion: Harsh Environment, Popular Beliefs and Folk culture

As a settler it is indeed extremely difficult to live and plan ones future in a mangrove forest influenced by very high tides (tidal amplitude 5m approx), where there is virtually no fresh water, even in the rivers, where the whole area is regularly worked by occasional intense cyclonic storms and where man-eating tigers are numerous. Indeed the control of the Sundarbans environment presented a challenge for those intending to utilize its resources. In fact, living within this region required a great deal of adaptability on the part of its human inhabitants. The harsh nature of the area explains why many have held the Sundarbans to be “a land covered over with impenetrable forests, the hideous den of all descriptions of beasts and reptiles….only to be improved by deforestation.” 54 Studies have revealed that between 1873 to 1939, much of the interior blocks of Sandeshkhali, Kakdwip, Patharpratima ,Basanti, Kultali and Gosaba had been cleared of forest to make room for human settlements.(South 24 Parganas, Human Development Report; chapter 9).
Whatever the nature of its population – civilized or tribal, sparse or thick, the Sundarbans with its unique physical features offered a tough proposition to human habitation throughout the ages. Its shifting rivers, cyclonic hazards and occasional flooding despite embankments and exploits of animals, hampered efforts of clearing forest for cultivation. In short, the situation in Sundarbans was inconductive to long-term settlements leading to prosperity and blossoming of civilization of a high order. In fact battling with the hostilities of nature was so overwhelming an aspect of the settler’s lives in the Sundarbans that it led to the evolution of deities in whom they could seek refuge psychologically. We must mention here the names of Barakhan Gazi, Dakshin Rai, and Bono Bibi. Among the folk deities particularly associated with the Sundarbans is the Bono Bibi, the Lady of the Forests, a sylvian manifestation of the devi propitiated by the woodcutters, honey gatherers, fishermen, hunters alike. She is often represented by a stone-slab, clay pot or a full headed image seated on a tiger and has her own special festival in the winter months of the year. Dakshin Ray is usually
seated upon a tiger and is often accompanied by his brother or companion Kalu Ray. Dakshin Ray is worshipped throughout the Sundarbans as the supreme god of the tigers as well as a divine curer.\textsuperscript{55} Between the 17th c and 19th c there thrived in lower deltaic Bengal a punthi literature in Bengali verse devoted to the gods and goddesses of the Sundarbans. This literature reflected a mental outlook specific to the natural terrain that gave birth to it. Its theme was the struggle between man and nature.

\textit{Kotha raile bonobibi mai}
\textit{Abhagir putra dukhe mahalete jai}
\textit{Kangaler mata tumi bipadnashinee}
\textit{Amar dukhere mago tarabe aponi}
\textit{Tomar kadame mata sapinu uhare}
\textit{Rane bane bonobibi tarabe Bach hare}
\begin{itemize}
\item - Bonobibi Jahuranama
\end{itemize}

\textit{Tabe narapatibar kayabakyamane}
\textit{Pujila rayer pad bifida bidhane}
\textit{Ghare ghare jato lok pujila sakal}
\textit{Dakhshin rayer mane baro kutuhal}
\textit{Pitaputra duijane harashita mon}
\textit{Pujila rayer pad param jatan}
\begin{itemize}
\item - Raimangal by Krishnaram Das
\end{itemize}
We also have other deities being worshipped like Manosa, the four-armed goddess of snake. She represents the serpent, which is the symbol of water, something vitally important to this area. Manasa is thus a protector of snakes and of peoples from their deadly poison. Another important deity is Sitala. Thus for the settlers their religious beliefs were grounded in reality. Besides, beliefs of the Sundarban inhabitants stood apart from mainstream Hinduism and Islam. Folk religion here, as represented by local syncretic cults had a distinctive aura.  

The environmental limitations forced the inhabitants to adopt the local folk behaviour in order to maintain their livelihood. The deities were fashioned from day to day experiences and realities that evolved around conflict and strife. The attributes of the deities reflected the angst of the settlers who battled against nature and whose survival was by no means easy. These deities thus became patron saints whose benevolence could effectively ward off the dangers of the jungle and its dreaded fauna. One can even say that the realities of the harsh environment as well as the transformation noticed during colonial rule (that limited the use of forest resources by traditional
users and brought in capitalistic relation in resource extraction) all meant a recasting and reappropriation of the gods, as a certain sense of loss or a sense of danger was tackled with a reassurance from worshipping these nature inspired deities. What thus evolved here was not so much of a civilization as a way of living, but a culture emerging from responses to the challenges of the nature in various forms. Thus a nature – inspired culture emerged in Sundarbans.57

The Sundarbans region represents a highly productive environment, supporting a variety of economic activities, based on agriculture, fishery and forestry. The peculiar components of natural environment or the local eco-systems have given rise to variation in population densities and have attributed distinctive types and characteristics to the human settlements here.58 (The ratio of Hindu population to that of the Muslims is 3:1) The harsh environmental realities of Sundarbans has been influential in conditioning the settlement history of the region. In conclusion, we can say that the people of Sundarbans are essentially of multi-ethnic background having different occupational pursuits with
pluralistic religious beliefs, who are settled in common ecological set up and forced to practice some common religious ritual activities due to survival and sustenance in such a dangerous environmental situation.\textsuperscript{59} It is this aspect of Sundarbans that makes it truly a focal point of socio-ecological study as well as a region where social ecology has found almost a new meaning.
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