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**NEXUS BETWEEN CLIMATE CHANGE AND RISE IN CRIMES IN THE
SUNDARBANS**- Subhradeep Saha¹**ABSTRACT**

“The world will not be destroyed by those who do evil but by those who watch them without doing anything.”

- Albert Einstein

Sundarbans is a geographically exposed region that is prone to cyclones and storms, and with the rapid changes in weather and climate, those cyclones and storms are only going to become more intense and frequent. Adding to that, the rise in sea level due to the melting of polar caps is also driven by climate change. Amidst everything, the indigenous communities of Sundarbans are not only being subjected to loss of land due to encroaching seawater, cyclones, and storms, but are also facing ever-increasing crimes against themselves.

Currently, the planet is on the brink of a climate catastrophe and measures to prevent it from happening have proven to be inefficient. Traffickers often use fraudulent methods like fake promises of employment, marriage, education, etc. in order to entice the victims or even use force and deception to make them fall prey to this horrific crime. More often than not, these crimes go unreported or the victims are never found again. Via this paper, the author has addressed the nexus between the rapidly changing climate and the rise in crimes against the indigenous communities of Sundarbans by analyzing various factors, discussing case studies, the nature of the crimes committed, and how factors of climate change contribute to such crimes. The author has also suggested a few recommendations regarding tackling the mentioned

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issues after thoroughly analyzing the total situation both at the macro and micro levels.

Keywords – Climate catastrophe, human traffickers Sundarbans, crimes, indigenous communities.

Research Question – Does climate change affect the crime rate in the Sundarbans?

Research Objective – To show that climate change does indeed affect the crime rate in the Sundarbans.

Research Methodology – The author has adopted an empirical method of research in the current research paper.

A.Introduction.

Climate change is one of the biggest issues faced by the planet in the modern day. Climate change may be referred to as a long-term shift in temperatures and patterns of weather. Those changes can be due to natural activities or human activities. However, since the 18th century human activities, like burning fossil fuels, have primarily contributed towards climate change. The notion of climate change creates, or has created a naive perception among most people of this planet that the said notion only means a rise in annual temperatures. However, the rise in temperatures can be coined as the beginning of the story. Consequences of climate change include intense droughts, water scarcity, forest fires, *rise in sea level*, flooding, melting of polar ice, catastrophic storms and declining biodiversity².

While climate change has become a global threat, there are certain sections of people that face the effects of climate change than the rest in a much more intense manner. Those certain sections of people include the indigenous communities that live in geographically exposed areas, especially forests, of India. The consequences of climate change as mentioned afore may include certain adverse effects that cause heavy damage to the planet and creatures that live in it; however, as argued above, the indigenous communities often find themselves affected more severely, by issues (crimes) that arise from such consequences of climate change.

More often than not, such issues or crimes occur against women than against men. The paper

² United Nations Climate Change, available at <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/what-is-climate-change>, last seen on 22/07/2023.

aims to elaborately analyze that the crimes against women forest dwellers are rising due to climate change through an eco-feminist lens.

B. Effects of climate change on the lives of forest dwellers.

In India, there are many forests that are home to numerous indigenous communities. One of these forests is the Sundarbans. It is listed as one of the world heritage sites by UNESCO³. Being one of the largest mangrove forests in the world, the Sundarbans, located partially in India and partially in Bangladesh, is home to numerous tribes (indigenous communities). The Sundarbans lie on the delta of the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna rivers on the Bay of Bengal, making the area vulnerable to cyclones and sea level rise.

There has been a rise in sea level by three centimeters on average over a year, for the past two decades and since the Sundarbans is located in such a geographically exposed region, it is not only subject to cyclones and storms but also coastal erosion due to rise in sea waters. The coastal erosion of the mouth of the Bay of Bengal has been subject to one of the fastest rates in recent years.

Results of such coastal erosion⁴ –

1. Local tribes are being forced to relocate as their lands are being swallowed by the sea due to the rise in water level.
2. The farmlands of the local tribes are poisoned by the saltwater of the sea, resulting in causing a major blow to their livelihood.
3. The hunting grounds of such tribes have also been swallowed by the fast-encroaching sea waters which is another blow to their source of livelihood. Along with that, the tigers of the area are also driven towards the local communities as their lands have also been swallowed by the sea, risking the lives of the indigenous people.
4. Alongside not being able to farm, the locals are also unable to fish. It is so because the

³ World heritage list (1987), India, World heritage convention, UNESCO available at <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/452>, last seen on 21/07/2023.

⁴ On the front line of climate change in India's Sundarbans – Johan Agusten, 17th October, 2019, available at <https://news.mongabay.com/2019/10/sundarbans-climate-change-tigers-india/>, last seen on 18/07/2023.

local fish are venturing into the deeper waters, into the tiger territories. The same goes for catching crabs and collecting honey.

These are the results of the consequences of climate change on the people of Sundarbans (indigenous communities). These results give way to a series of crimes against the local people, especially the women forest dwellers. Crimes like sexual offenses and human trafficking have significantly risen due to various reasons with the core factor being climate change.

Often when cyclones and storms hit this region, due to the poor infrastructure of houses and the region itself, the local people are needed to be evacuated and are kept in large shelters where they stay there for weeks, or even months. **“These shelters are targeted by the traffickers and they picked up so many girls at a time”**, said Sougata Gosh, police inspector of Canning, the largest town in the Sundarbans. He added by saying, **“Obviously, climate change has a direct effect on trafficking because it is directly affecting the financial status of the families. Often these families become homeless, making them vulnerable to this crime”**⁵.

C. Rise in crimes against forest dwellers.

Due to the results of the factors of climate change as explained afore, it is more often the case than not that people living in such indigenous communities try to move on from such forests, settle in big cities and lead their lives there, because they feel that the forest that they have been living in for so many years does not have anything more to offer apart from more problems, or life in a city would be much easier and less dangerous than life in a forest. This perception is created by the fact that Sundarbans remains a place that is prone to cyclones, storms, and has dangerous wildlife. The lands are gradually going underwater due to the rise in sea levels and their livelihood and homes are severely affected by such.

Here, traffickers tend to target these vulnerable people, especially women, who are completely unaware of the fact that they are being led into a dark reality. They persuade such people via various means to migrate to the cities. Women in these conditions are also exposed to sexual offenses like rape, sexual harassment, etc. Since they live in remote areas, often these crimes go unreported.

⁵‘I trusted him’: human trafficking surges in cyclone-hit east India by Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Ahmer Khan, Tue 13 Jun 2023 – the guardian, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/13/i-trusted-him-human-trafficking-surges-in-cyclone-hit-east-india?ref=upstrack.com>.

These traffickers often entice such people who are looking to get out of that place, by presenting job offers, proposal for marriage or even promise for education. More often than not these people accept the offer as they see an opportunity to get out of the forest and start a new life in the urban forest. When such people move to the big cities they are abducted and are either trafficked to other faraway places or are forced into prostitution or forced labor⁶.

CASE STUDY - In the case of Asha Tamang vs. State of West Bengal⁷, the accused, Asha Tamang, had charges of kidnapping⁸ a minor girl of age seventeen and bringing her to Kolkata, by inducing her with a job offer. The said girl was forced to work as a prostitute at the accused's own brothel at Mitra Street, Kolkata. Although the girl was originally from Nepal and not Sundarbans, this case stands as evidence that traffickers do use such techniques or strategies to traffic people⁹.

Sometimes such women can also be tricked into marrying a trafficker disguised as a suitor, who promises the girl a better life and that is how women are brought to the bigger cities where again, they face a similar fate.

CASE STUDY - The case of Foyam SK, Fhoim SK, Fine SK and Samina Bibi vs. State of West Bengal¹⁰ can be used as an example of the above-mentioned theory. In this case, a minor girl was sent by her mother to work as a domestic helper at the residence of the accused. The girl was then taken to Saudi Arabia by the accused under the pretense of marriage. The girl was forced into prostitution and was also forced to beg for alms¹¹.

CASE STUDY – Anima became a victim of this crime when she was only 13 years old. An older man named Rubik from out of town succeeded in establishing a romantic relationship with Anima. Eventually, Rubik summoned Amina to the local railway station and proposed her

⁶ Namita Singh, The Indian villagers forced into sex slavery as a result of climate change, the Independent, Saturday 08 April 2023 13:42, available at <https://www.independent.co.uk/climate-change/india-sundarbans-trafficking-climate-change-b2316494.html>, last seen on 8/8/2023.

⁷ Asha Tamang v/s State of West Bengal, CRA No. 398 of 2008

⁸ S. 359, Indian Penal Code, 1860.

⁹ Asha Tamang vs. State of West Bengal, United Nations Office of Drugs and Crimes - case law database – India, available at https://sherloc.unodc.org/cld//case-law-doc/traffickingpersonscrimetype/ind/2011/asha_tamang_v._state_of_west_bengal_.html?lng=en&tmpl=sherloc, last seen on 22/07/2023.

¹⁰Foyam Sk. @ Fhoim Sk. @ Fine Sk. And ... vs State Of West Bengal, LAWS (CAL) 2003-11-15.

¹¹Foyam SK, Fhoim SK, Fine SK and Samina Bibi vs. State of West Bengal, United Nations Office of Drugs and Crimes - case law database – India, available at https://sherloc.unodc.org/cld/en/case-law-doc/traffickingpersonscrimetype/ind/2003/foyam_sk._fhoim_sk._fine_sk._and_samina_bibi_v._state_of_west_ben_gal.html, last seen on 18/07/2023.

the idea of “running away” to her, leaving her family behind. When she denied it, Rubik pressed a drugged handkerchief against her face and abducted her by using force. She was taken to a house in a small town in Bihar. As per Amina herself, she was beaten, tortured, and raped by Rubik and many other men¹².

D. Scenario in the South 24 Parganas District of West Bengal.

The region of Sundarbans which lie within the geographic borders of India, falls in the geographical ambit of South 24 Parganas district in the state of West Bengal, in India. Joynagar and Kultali are two of the 13 community development blocks of the Sundarbans. Focusing on these two communities from an economic standpoint, it can be said that the state of the said places is not good. People of these indigenous communities mostly depend upon agriculture and fishing as sources of income. As already discussed, due to climate change consequences, the farmlands or the agricultural lands are either being swallowed or poisoned by the encroaching saltwater of the sea. Therefore, the economic state that is already bad in these aforesaid locations only gets worse following the consequences of climate change¹³. A vulnerability analysis shows that people, women especially, are subject to crimes like human trafficking in these regions more than in other regions of the country. The Joynagar and Kultali region of the Sundarbans recorded the highest number of crimes against women (680) during 2005 to 2007. The numbers have only increased since then¹⁴.

This shows a pattern that exists between the loss of livelihood and occupation caused due to climate change and the increase in crimes against the people of the indigenous communities, especially the women. The destination areas for these trafficked victims are mostly Goa, Mumbai, Delhi, Jaipur, Telangana, and various regions of Odissa. Only in 2020, approximately

¹²‘I trusted him’: human trafficking surges in cyclone-hit east India by Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Ahmer Khan, Tue 13 Jun 2023 – the guardian, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/13/i-trusted-him-human-trafficking-surges-in-cyclone-hit-east-india?ref=upstract.com>.

¹³ Das, Karabi. (2017). Perils of Women Trafficking: A Case Study of Joynagar, Kultali Administrative Blocks, Sundarban, India. International Journal of Education, Culture and Society, available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321652363_Perils_of_Women_Trafficking_A_Case_Study_of_Joynagar_Kultali_Administrative_Blocks_Sundarban_India/citation/download, last seen on 10/8/2023.

¹⁴ Adler Serena (Ministry of Waters, Forests and Environment Protection), Dorulonana (Ministry of Justice), Ursuleanu Dan (Ministry of Health). 2004. Human Development Report 2004: Cultural Liberty in Today’s Diverse World. New York, available at <https://hdr.undp.org/content/human-development-report-2004>, last seen on 10/8/2023.

2,500 victims combined were rescued from these respective places as per the NCRB report¹⁵.

E. Migration: A driver of crimes in Sundarbans.

Migration has two important factors - the pull factor and the push factor. Factors that drive people toward a particular place can be termed as pull factors. On the other hand, factors that drive people away from a particular area are called push factors. These two factors play a vital role, simultaneously, sometimes one more than the other, in migration.

People of the Sundarbans are primarily cultivators, agricultural laborers, livestock farmers, and fishermen. Approximately, 15.5% of the population depends on cultivation, 43.5% of the population depends on agricultural labor and 20% of the population depends on fish and livestock farming and forestry as of 2013¹⁶.

As already established, coastal erosion caused by sea level rise due to climate change causes such occupational sources to become obsolete. This works as a push factor as it drives people away from their normal residence to another area that is situated in a completely different location. Urban cities offer different sources of occupation which may be hampered by climate change. This acts as a pull factor as it drives these same people towards the urban cities in search of jobs, a better life to be precise.

In this scenario, human traffickers work as a catalyst. There can be times when a particular individual thinks of migrating but does not due to a lack of uncertainty and information. Such people may be unaware of how the city works or they might have a sense of insecurity regarding leaving their homes. However, here these traffickers encourage such people to move to the big cities by promising them work in case of men and marriage in case of women. Oblivious to the criminal intentions, these people agree to migrate and that is when the traffickers strike.

F. Nature of crimes.

¹⁵ National Crime Records Bureau report, 2020, available at <https://ncrb.gov.in/en/node/3454>

¹⁶ Migration and Sustainable Livelihoods: A Study from Sundarban Biosphere Reserve - AvijitMistri; vol. 2 of Asia-pacific journal of social science, December – 2013 available at https://www.academia.edu/7131576/Migration_and_Sustainable_Livelihoods_A_Study_from_Sundarban_Biosphere_Reserve, last seen on 8/8/2023.

Every crime is driven by *mens rea* and a motive. Human trafficking is an offence in itself. Under the Indian Penal Code, of 1860, the essentials and ingredients of human tracking having specified in section 370. It is worth noting that though it is an offence in itself it is done for various purposes like sexual exploitation, dealing in slaves, buying or selling for prostitution, etc.

There can various forms of trafficking, namely¹⁷:

- i) **Child trafficking** – this includes the abduction of minors for the purpose of exploitation, be it as a sex worker or by being forced into labor. Statistics say that 7 out of 10 victims are below the age of 18¹⁸.
- ii) **Sex trafficking** – this includes the trafficking of women for the purpose of prostitution. About 4.5 million worldwide have been subject to this sort of crime.
- iii) **Labor trafficking** – this includes the trafficking of individuals for the purpose of forced labor. Mostly these individuals are sent abroad as far as the Middle East from where they have no chance of escaping.
- iv) **Forced marriage** – lastly, trafficking for the sake of forced marriage is a rather unique yet prevalent concept. Here, women are abducted and trafficked away to faraway places in order to get married against their will and consent. These women either serve as sources of ‘seeking pleasure’ for their husbands or may also serve as house servants or even both. Hence, this sort of trafficking may fall within the ambit of sex trafficking or labor trafficking, or even both.

Human trafficking isn't a crime that is committed by an individual. It is rather an organizational crime and there are several stages of it. There are people who abduct the victims, there are people who are responsible for transporting the victims, and lastly, the people who consume “buy” the victims for personal gain or pleasure or both.

Hence, it is very difficult for an individual to defend himself or herself against such an organized crime. Now adding to the fact that the indigenous people who live in geographically exposed regions like the Sundarbans, a location which has very poor infrastructure, is prone to

¹⁷ Das, Karabi. (2017). Perils of Women Trafficking: A Case Study of Joynagar, Kultali Administrative Blocks, Sundarban, India. International Journal of Education, Culture and Society, available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321652363_Perils_of_Women_Trafficking_A_Case_Study_of_Joynagar_Kultali_Administrative_Blocks_Sundarban_India/citation/download, last seen on 10/8/2023.

¹⁸ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2016): India: Bringing the curtain down on human trafficking.

wildlife threats, and is also prone to climatic disasters, absolutely have no way of defending themselves against such crimes. Their homes are getting washed away in the storm, and their livelihood (agriculture) is getting ruined by the encroaching seawater, all factors and outcomes of climate change. This makes them even more vulnerable.

G.Conclusion and recommendations.

Crimes against forest dwellers such as sexual offenses and human trafficking, are indirectly related to the consequences of climate change as established above. Forest dwellers, especially women, face such crimes on a daily basis, especially during the pre-monsoon and monsoon seasons (rapid flooding due to rain), and more often than not such crimes go unreported. These people can get trafficked to different parts of the country and even as far as the Middle East at times¹⁹. The Sundarbans is a large area that is prone to rapid sea level rise, cyclones, etc. All these massively and adversely affect the indigenous communities of Sundarbans and such is increasing with each passing day because of climate change which is the driving factor behind such problems. India does not have any laws concerning climate protection and neither does Bangladesh.

Climate change is a global issue and hence, it is only logical to deal with this situation globally rather than as individual states. Hence, the UN shall set a universal standard of climate protection so that nations across the globe can adopt those standards as statutes after making necessary changes suitable to their respective nations since the effects, causes, and consequences of climate change are more or less similar across the globe. This step will also contribute towards goal number 13 of the 17 sustainable development goals.

The nexus between climate change and crimes against the indigenous people of the Sundarbans is one of many such outcomes of climate change. Though climate change has a direct effect on the rise in crimes against the people of Sundarbans it cannot be expected that the crime rate will go down if the climate is brought under control. Having said that, climate change and the aforesaid crimes are issues that should be dealt simultaneously and separately. Crimes against the indigenous people require immediate remedies and on the other hand, climate change also requires immediate action as the planet is on the brink of a climatic catastrophe. However,

¹⁹ Unmasking dark malady of sex trafficking in the Sunderbans, The guardian - Patricia Dsouza lobo, March 25, 2023.

climate action is a rather long-term process, which is precisely the reason why both issues have to be dealt with separately.



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