

Eco-Displacement and Trafficking: A Curse of Climate Change in Amitav

Ghosh's Gun Island

Rangalal Mondal
Ph. D. Research Scholar
Department of English
Central University of South Bihar, Gaya

Abstract

Sundarbans is the largest mangrove delta shared by India and Bangladesh. It is a cyclone prone area. The livelihoods of the people are very much affected by various natural calamities. Presently, survival has become a challenge due to the fatal curse of climate change as most of people depend on agricultural activities and natural resources. Every year they have to surrender themselves and their belongings to nature and its calamities. As a result, they are forced to move to safer places to find the minimum means of survival. Some people find a better means but sometimes people engage in illegal activities to find better way of living. They have been caught in the hands of the broker and finally they become the victims of the trafficking. The brokers easily divert them taking advantages of their worse situation. Analyzing Ghosh's *Gun Island* through ecocritical perspective, I shall try to explore the above issues with the help of E. G. Ravenstein's 'laws of migration' that how the climate change fuels the socio-economic crisis that causes migration. It will also be followed Everett S. Lee's 'Push and Pull' factors that reinforce the migrants to entangle with trafficking. This paper looks at the two facts: first, how the curse of climate change causes displacement and second, how they are victimized in the conspiracy of human trafficking.

Keywords: Climate Curse, Migration, Trafficking, Cyclone, Refugee.

Introduction

People of the Sundarbans rely on agriculture and fishing for their survival and livelihoods. But now-a-days frequent changes of climate bring a crisis in their professional lives. The frequent cyclones, floods and river erosion repeatedly uproot their families. The climate change has taken a pivotal role in their life. Most of the river bank made of mud and clay (Chakraborty 2020). When the storms come, they create huge wave in the sea and very easily they break the bank and enter into the crop fields. According to the local people, if the sea water enters into the cropland for a single time, the field turns into a barren land. The most horrific and fearful fact is that the salt water makes the land infertile and no crops produce for almost ten years (Chowdhury et al. 2022, 8). Thus, the frequent storms gradually cover and increase the salinity of the land. The gradual salinisation of the soil make them turn their occupation from agriculture to other. They feel that if they invest their money on cultivation, they face severe loss and after a whole year's hard labour they have to live on debts or loans (Das and Ghosh 5). As a result, they are moving from their permanent habitats. The salinisation is snatching their professions and making them migrant labourers. But except from the profession, the harsh effect of the climate change makes their settled things unsettled also. Normally, the people of the Sundarbans live in the hut made of thatch and clay. The frequent storms snatch away their huts every year and it creates so tough financial crisis that they cannot arrange their shelter again. Resulting them migrant from their own land. The novel *Gun Island* by Amitav Ghosh is an excellent example of environmental documents. Here Ghosh connects problems of the Sundarbans with global issues (Murugesan and Vanitha 2023, 801). The novel opens with Dinonath Datta known as Dinu or Deen. He is a rare book dealer, lived in New York and came to India for a collection of the folklore of Sundarbans on the Gun Merchant. The author brings many characters from the novel *The Hungry Tide* Such as Nilima, the owner of the Badaban Trust, Piya, the Cetologist, Moyna, Tutul and Haren. The novel is in two parts- part one is The

Gun Merchant and part two is Venice. In part one the author says about the legendary of the Gun Merchant and Manasa Devi. The Gun Merchant was once the inhabitant of the Sundarbans but he left to escape from the curse of Manasa Devi, the goddess of the poison and venom. Nilima, a distant aunt of Dinu told him that the people of the Sundarbans worship this goddess making shrine. But due to extreme and harsh weather with the uprooting of the families, the shrine is also going to disappear. If he really wants to document it, he should immediately visit that island. Visiting the island, Dinu met Tutul who is known as Tipu and his foster mother Piya. He also met Rafi, who is the preserver of the Shrine. Meeting Rafi and Tipu, he came to know about migration and the trafficking conspiracy. In this novel the author masterly connects the effects of climate change in Sundarbans and Venice. In some chapter of this novel the author hints about the apocalypse of the environmental balance. Indirectly Ghosh hints about the climate induced migration of the people from Sundarbans to many parts of the world to escape from the claw of nature or in search of better life. Older people start to survive on begging. The young and younger people flee to many countries. The women are sold or forced to take the profession of prostitution. This paper discusses about the human trafficking and migration as a result of the crude climate crisis. The discussion also goes on anthropocentrism that the people themselves are responsible for some of their own plights.

Amitav Ghosh never fails to present the plight and distress of the downtrodden referring the very current issues. The novel *Gun Island* masterly provokes the magical and uncanny insights that are totally new about climate change. It upholds the plight of the refugees and migrant workers (Kaur 2023). It depicts the young people who become immigrants to fix a better world (Kanmani and Aruna 2020). The novel connects past and present with a myth. It features the anthropocentric impact on ecology (Uzun 2022). The ecological catastrophe makes the path smooth for displacement of both humans and non-humans (Syed et.al. 2023). Ghosh's narratives slightly touch the women's close proximity with nature as they spend much of their

time in fields or garden cutting, pruning and taking care as their own child (Gope 2021). In this novel we can trace about the impending calamities of global environment through the connection between Sundarbans and Venice (Kanjirathingal and Banerjee 2021). The scholars explored almost all the issues such as the problems of the refugees, immigrants, the mythical connection with ecology, human and non-human relationships, ecofeminism and the global ecological problems but none of the studies points out human trafficking issues properly. Some of the papers discuss it with the issues of refugee and immigration. The discussion on climate induced victims of human trafficking is very rare. In this paper I attempt to examine the climate induced victims of human trafficking pointing out the proper instances from the novel *Gun Island*.

Factors Influencing Migration and Trafficking

The concept of migration is very complex in nature. It based on many factors such as political, social and environmental (The 3). The particular theory to explain these factors is hard to find out but still some theorists attempted to contribute their ideas on this area. In 1885 based upon the British census, E.G. Ravenstein listed a set of generalizations that he identified as 'laws of migration' (Ravenstein 241). D. Grigg explains the generalizations that the relation between distance and volume of migration is inverse. Mostly the migrants move to short distance but long-distance migration happens mainly to choose commerce and industry. He also says that the large and develop countries attract the migrants more than other urban area (Grigg 42). When Tipu finds himself unemployed one even after hard trying, he decides to go to abroad. He decides to go to Venice to find a job. The migration also happens in case of gender base (Rubiano and Beegle). Moyna, the mother of Tipu works in an N.G.O. to fight against the girls' discrimination and sufferings. The female migrates more in number though it is for shorter distance but the male crosses the national boundary mostly. Ravenstein says that the migration may vary on age groups. The adults migrate more in number than other age groups. Rafi agrees

to flee with Tipu to abroad. Though he sensed the impending dangers, he decided to leave his homeland as he understood that staying and suffering in their homeland are meaningless. Ravenstein also argues that most of the migration causes mainly due to the economic reasons. However, the scholars found that Ravenstein's laws of migration depends on various influencing factors such as labour force, industrialization, distance, education, sex, race etc.

Everett Spurgeon Lee, a sociologist introduced another theory on migration known as the Push and Pull theory. The Push factors force for out migration and the Pull factors appear with lot of opportunities that attract the migrants. It is also known as Lee's Theory. In this theory he provides us four categories of factors; the factors related to the area of origin, the factors related to the area of destination, personal factors and intervening obstacles (Lee 49). People from the tide land discover that their land is no more secure and they have to find out another place that is secure for them and their family. Elaborating these four categories of factors, Lee points out that there are numerous positive and negative factors that work to drive away the people from their land and also attract people for a new destination. Between the dilemma of origin and destination, people have to overcome the intervening obstacles such as transportation and distance (Lee 51). Some people tried hard to manage their food and bread from the nearby cities by regular journey but they faced that it is not possible to maintain the long-distance journey regularly. To discuss about the personal factors, Lee says that these factors are the most influential factors as actual act of migration relies on individual perception.

The major root causes behind trafficking lies in many factors. The most probable factors can be divided into many categories such as socio-economic factors, gender inequality and discrimination, political instability and conflicts, corruption and organized crime. The socioeconomic factors like income, education and employment make the way smooth for trafficking. People belonging to lower socioeconomic background become more victims than the people of higher socioeconomic background (Spencer et al. 11). Most of the people who

are victimized of trafficking lack education and they do not understand the topsy-turvy of the situation. Income and employment also work as key factors. People who are employed and have a regular income, do not respond to the beckoning of traffickers (Mangindin). Gender inequality and discrimination are also responsible for trafficking. Gender inequality brings discrimination in employment opportunities. People believe that female workers are weaker than male workers and that is why female workers will work less than male workers. They think twice before employing any female workers, and if they employ, they give very low wages to the female workers. Gender inequality also discriminates the women from education. The common social belief is that females are no need to give education as after marriage they will go to the in-laws' house so only they will prepare for marriage. This type of mindset and discrimination lead women in the hand of traffickers (Weatherburn 25-26). Another factor that mostly effects the trafficking is political conflict. If people feel that they are not safe in their ground, they try to change their habitant and the traffickers do not forget to accept the knock of the opportunity. Corruption and organized crime are similarly responsible for trafficking. In many cases it has been seen that the government officials engaged with the direct corruption during law enforcement for some certain profit. Instead of providing necessary needs to the victims, they derail people to the trade of human trafficking (Palifka and Rose-Ackerman 296).

Migration as an ultimate way of survival

Primarily people of Sundarbans depend on agriculture, fishing, seed collection, wood collection and honey collection. Out of total population more than sixty percent population is dependent on agriculture (Ghimire and Vikas 10). Approximately eighty eight percent population of this area is dependent on fishing (Rosencranz et al. 2020). But frequent cyclone like Aila, Amphan become a threat in the life of these people. People who have been dependent on fishing for surviving are severely finding hard to hold their profession due to penetration of saline water in inner delta and overexploitation of inner water body resources.

Consequently, it is resulting the seasonal migration from Sundarbans to other parts of Indian states. But the pandemic influences on them very much. Due to the lockdown, they could not migrate and they return to agriculture and again they faced excessive loss as continuous change of climate brings the production growth level in the brink. Finally, the combined influence of these issues is pushing them to adopt illegal means of surviving. In his novel Amitav Ghosh observed:

“In these parts, there’s a whole bunch of dirt-poor, illiterate people scratching out a living by fishing or farming or going into the jungle to collect bamboo and honey. Or at least that’s what they used to do. But now the fish catch is down, the land’s turning salty.” (Ghosh 61)

The tendency of migration is increasing the scarcity of the water also. People of Sundarbans live mainly on agriculture. Basically, they depend on rice cultivation. Yearly two times they produce rice-*Boro* and *Amon*. The outturn in the season of *Amon* is very poor. That is why most people depend on *Boro* season. Now-a-days this season is also putting question mark in their livelihood. During this *Boro* season they have to depend greatly upon groundwater irrigation (Nath et al.). But this water source has come to the verge of arsenic threat. The arsenic contamination becomes a challenge to the sustainability of agriculture. In recent times repeated cyclones caused the ingress of saline water. As a result, they become more and more dependable on groundwater. A study says that if people consume groundwater every year in huge amount, there in the layer of groundwater create a vacuum. Gradually that whole layer increases the intensity of arsenic in water. So, with the advance of time people are becoming more dependable on ground water and as a result they are increasing the intensity of arsenic (Nath et al.). Presently, water for cultivation is far off words as drinking water has reached to the level of scarcity. Ghosh in his novel points out:

“Suppose the guy was starving because his land was flooded; or suppose his whole village was sick from the arsenic in their ground water; or suppose he was being beat up by his landlord because he couldn’t pay off his debts.” (Ghosh 62)

The repeated cyclones left the lives in Sundarbans in uncertain. After the cyclone they get certain economic help and funding from many NGOs and CBOs. But this is for a small period and when that period is over, their lives fall in the same difficulty. A study says that the continuous effect of climate change gradually weakens the resilience of the communities (Ghosh et al. 22). We have discussed earlier also that the lives in Sundarbans on agriculture and fishing are becoming tough day by day. The study by agricultural scientists and marine scientists says that salinity of water is the main root behind the uncertain lives (Water-Digest). Hopefully they are taking measures to encourage the farmers and the fishermen to use salinity resistant seeds and saline tolerant fish varieties. Though they have introduced different species of fishes and prawns that can tolerate salinity. It is suggested that the brackish aquaculture can be sustainable and alternative culture to provide profitable livelihood for the islanders (Ghoshal et al. 344). But still the majority of people facing difficulty to survive as farmers are not fully aware about this very well and they have lack of knowledge. However, these alternatives have many challenges. The most notable challenge they may face that these alternatives are not affordable and accessible to the poorest of the poor because in Sundarbans most people are living below the poverty level. Ultimately without getting any solution they travel to another state or cross the national border finding no means of survival. Amitav Ghosh wrote:

“He used to say that things were changing so much, and so fast, that I wouldn’t be able to get by here – he told me that one day I would have no choice but to leave.” (Ghosh 86)

Now-a-days the most important and worldwide haunted matter is security. Worldwide people are trying to ensure the security- the food security, professional security, economic security, health security and many more. But the effects of climate change in Sundarbans again and again arise question mark in the life of people. Every year they are wounded by several natural calamity. They even prepare for fatal disaster but day by day it is coming in new forms obtaining more devastative power. Immediate after the disaster they get some monetary help by the Government and the NGOs to recover from the situation instantly but they find that the long term and permanent solution is hopeless. After some days they discover themselves in the same situation as before. As a result, they think alternative way of survival. Most of the household members become seasonal migrants. They migrate to a safer place where the wage labour is in demand. People who have ability to purchase the land in the nearby secure places, buy land and stay there but those who don't have any means to do that migrate to the distant city permanently. They do not think to return back as firstly they no longer have the land because of erosion and secondly, they don't have any means of survival (Das and Hazra). Ghosh points out the plights of the people:

“The evacuations too had produced effects that no one could have foretold. Having once been uprooted from their villages many evacuees had decided not to return, knowing that their lives, always hard, would be even more precarious now.” (Ghosh 48)

Trapped in an uncertain future

There is a saying in the Sundarbans that cyclone is a must festival for every year. People living in the area of West Bengal's Sundarbans that basically spread between South 24 Parganas and North 24 Parganas, consider cyclones as major consternation in their lives. Each year the devastating cyclone comes and hit their villages and push their lives in the cavern of poverty.

They are living in a spiral poverty (Deol 2022). Throughout the year they labour hard to arrange their shelter and belongings and at a time everything scatters just by a mere storm. Life is not easy in Sundarbans. It is true that if they work there as an agricultural laborer, they could hardly make their ends meet. They found that every year their lives are drowned in debts after a long time they had to sell their ancestors' belongings to pay their debts (Ghoshal 2021). Some people who don't have anything to sell, chose the path of suicide. As a result, they are taking back their faces from agriculture to find the other means to survive. Consequently, they hold the hands of the traffickers and detach their lives from Sundarbans (Ghosh 2015). They know very well that that hand is not helping hand but still they hold the hand and leave their habitants forever. In this regard we can remind of a local resident's words that falling in danger is better than sitting hopelessly and starving fecklessly till death. Ghosh in his novel rightly noticed that devastating cyclone hunts Sundarbans every year and brings severe poverty. The brokers and traffickers take advantages of that fatal situation. People who left their homes, never thought to go back in their native places again. Ghosh observes:

“The Sundarbans had always attracted traffickers, because of its poverty, but never in such numbers as after Aila; they had descended in swarms, spiriting women off to distant brothels and transporting able-bodied men to work sites in faraway cities or even abroad. Many of those who left were never heard from again.” (Ghosh 49)

Ghosh through the character of Tipu and Rafi from the novel *Gun Island* exposes the problems of the people especially of the young generations. Except from agricultural profession, the scope of other professions is also affected by continuous change of climate. People who earlier depended on crops and fishes, are now finding jobs in various other states. A survey by World Bank says that at least one member of thirty percent households is working as a migrant labour in other state (Priyadarshini 2015). Another study on local people reported that more than ninety percent households do not agree to hold the professions depend on forest

resources. Subhas Acharya, a former administrator of Sundarban affairs says that more than sixty percent of male is estimated to be migrating out and taking awkward jobs that they never thought or heard. According to a local resident who works at a local brick kiln “Now, we can neither be sure of our crop yields nor fish yields. What else can we do but get jobs elsewhere to make ends meet?” (Priyadarshini 2015). He also says that his younger brother and cousins who earlier used to run their families owning water bodies, have now taken up jobs as construction laborers in Bengaluru. Not only men but also women and young girls are also migrating and trafficking in other states. Here we can remind of Taran Deol’s report ‘trafficking of young girls from the Sundarbans’ (Deol 2022). She explains the stormy life of two girls Tisha and Salima. Salima and Tisha lived in a village of Sundarbans. Salima says “Cyclone Amphan caused a massive tidal surge, washing away our house and all our belongings within minutes” (Deol 2022). She also says that they had a small shop in their village. They used to sell a few chickens to arrange food for families but it could not sustain for long. They became desperate looking for employment and income. Suddenly an opportunity knocked at their door. A woman from their own village living in Delhi offered them a job of domestic help at a government official’s house. She says, the owner will provide 10,000 per month with food and free lodging. Salima says that they grabbed the opportunity at their first chance but when she reached Delhi, with her all surprise she realized that she was sold to a broker for Rs 5 lakh for forced prostitution (Deol 2022). Young girls like Tisha and Salima become victims of the human trafficking. Amitav Ghosh rightly draws the attention of the readers that young generation of Sundarbans are forced to cross the borders and engage in illegal and anti-social activities. Ghosh points out:

“Making a life in the Sundarbans had become so hard that the exodus of the young was accelerating every year: boys and girls were borrowing and stealing to pay agents to find them work elsewhere. Some were slipping over the border into Bangladesh, to join

labour gangs headed for the Gulf. And if that failed, they would pay traffickers to smuggle them to Malaysia or Indonesia, on boats.” (Ghosh 49)

It is assumed that due to uncertain climate phenomena, many millions of people will flee from Sundarbans (Basu 2018). In the coming decades, human security will be the most discussable agenda in Sundarbans. Those who are affluent in economic status can manage themselves easily but those who are poor and unable to manage their safe haven, are choosing illegal way of migration (Bose and Satapathy 474). The increasing impacts of climate change and environmental crisis have become the central causes of cross-border migration. In recent years, two major issues i.e., loss of habitats and lands caused due to the rise of sea level affect the coastal area's habitats badly. In search of food and shelter, the coastal populations are constantly migrating from one island to another island. There is a constant influx of Sundarbans migrants to other states and foreign lands that can be termed as 'crisis migrants' (Bose 2014). They are crossing illegally in anticipation of threats in their own lands and accidentally becoming trapped by humanitarian crisis. The storm surges, tropical cyclones and frequent floods have had an immense impact on Sundarbans' population. Various crisis such as the river bank erosion, shrinkage of land area and encroachment of salt waters into agricultural lands have forced farmers to search new lands. These fall them in problems of landlessness, income disparities, degradation of human habitats and unemployment. There are basically two types of migration happening from Sundarbans. The first one is that the Indian Sundarban dwellers are migrating from one island to another island, that is internal migration and the second one is that they are migrating from their land to foreign land. The pathetic fact is that they are neither recognized by their government as their citizens nor by the other government as 'climate refugees' (Sinha 2022). Amitav Ghosh exposes the issues how Sundarbans' people are crossing the borders illegally to other land to make sure of their lives. He writes:

“Sure, I did,’ he said. ‘And yeah, I did have a passport back then. But it expired and I haven’t renewed it. Who needs to spend all that time in government offices? There are easier ways of getting a passport, and if you’ve got the money, you can choose whichever kind you want – Bangladeshi, Indian, Malaysian, Sri Lankan, you name it, they’ve all got a price. But if it’s just a matter of going over for a couple of days, you don’t need any of that – all you have to do is cross the river and you’re in Bangladesh.”

(Ghosh 59)

Conclusion

The life in the coastal area is very challenging. People who live in coastal area, lead more hazardous and stressful life than the people of plain area. If any coastal area faces less natural disaster, then no other coastal area would be better place to live than that less hazardous area. The cyclone prone coastal area is very dangerous as this area faces at least two disasters every year. The chasm Sundarban is such a Coastal area that is becoming a tough place for dwelling due to the crisis and changes in climate. To lead a smooth and peaceful life they don’t let any chance to slip from their handgrip. They try to grab any opportunity for a smooth life and there they become victims of human trafficking. The scholars have found that the poverty is the main reason behind this trafficking (Jamwal). Human trafficking is a shame for the whole nation. Many laws and regulations have made to prevent such kinds of crime still it is happening in its own way. The only way to cure this disease is to aware and educate people (Kevin and Town). The awareness should begin from school education. On the other hand, migration can only be prevented upgrading the standard of lives in this area. If the govt. takes measures to shift their dependence from nature and natural resources to other source of income, then they will not migrate from the realm. Also, they have to teach the scientific way of living that if they exploit nature, ultimately, they have to suffer for it.

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