*Women in Fisheries news articles compilation*

*FROM MARCH 2020 to MARCH 2022*

***WEST BENGAL:***

**1. West Bengal: Women plant mangroves to bolster India’s cyclone defences**

<https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/india/women-plant-mangroves-to-bolster-indias-cyclone-defences-1.83565194>

With India facing ever more powerful cyclones, women in the world’s largest mangrove forest are planting thousands of saplings to help protect their coastal communities from climate change. The Sundarbans straddle the coastline into neighbouring Bangladesh and are home to some of the world’s rarest creatures, including the Bengal tiger and the Irrawaddy dolphin. The forest has been designated a World Heritage site but has in the past suffered from illegal logging and is regularly battered by intense monsoon storms. Walking ankle-deep along a muddy shore, and balancing young plants on their heads, a group of local women last week began the long process of reforesting a bare stretch of coastline. “This is an area prone to storms and cyclones,” said Shivani Adhikari, one of the women involved in the initiative. “So to protect the embankments, all of us women are planting.” Mangroves protect coastlines from erosion and extreme weather events, improve water quality by filtering pollutants, and serve as nurseries for many marine creatures, according to the UN Environment Programme. They can help fight climate change by sequestering millions of tons of carbon each year in their leaves, trunks, roots and the soil.

And they also help buffer coastal communities from the cyclones that have coursed through the area. “If these embankments are protected, our village will survive,” said Goutam Nashkar, who lives near the project site. “If our village survives, we will survive,” he added. “This is our hope, our wish.” The project, backed by a local non-profit and the West Bengal government, aims to plant around 10,000 mangrove saplings. India’s eastern states and the coast of Bangladesh are regularly battered by cyclones that have claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of people in recent decades. While the frequency and intensity in storms have increased – with climate change to blame – deaths have fallen thanks to faster evacuations, better forecasting and more shelters.

**2. West Bengal: Extreme weather events in India made women, children more vulnerable to modern slavery, flags report**

<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/climate-change/extreme-weather-events-in-india-made-women-children-more-vulnerable-to-modern-slavery-flags-report-79128>

Climate change-induced extreme weather events put women, children and minorities at risk of modern slavery and human trafficking. The phenomenon is on the rise in India, among other countries, warned the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) and Anti-Slavery International in a recent report. Modern slavery — including debt bondage, bonded labour, early / forced marriage and human trafficking — converge with climate change, particularly climate shocks and climate-related forced displacement and migration, the report said. The report observed what happened in Sundarbans, for instance. The delta region is characterised by intense, recurrent and sudden onset disasters, as well as slow onset ecological degradation making large areas uninhabitable. Rising sea levels, erratic rainfall, increased frequency of cyclones, tidal surges and floods, mean that millions of people across the Sundarbans are unable to work for most of the year. In 2009, Cyclone Aila caused widespread damage to lives and livelihoods. In 2020, during Cyclone Amphan, 400 kilometres of embankment was breached and seawater entered the flood plains resulting in widespread displacement from homes and loss of livelihoods for more than two million people.

Such events made locals vulnerable to traffickers and drove them into forced labour, it said. Human trafficking had increased following the tsunami in Indonesia in 2004 as well. Severe cyclone and flooding in Sundarbans delta had also reduced the land for agriculture, which is the major source of livelihood. While restrictions were imposed by bordering countries, smugglers and traffickers operating in the affected region targeted widows and men desperate to cross the border to India to find employment. Women were trafficked and often forced into hard labour and prostitution, with some working in sweatshops along the border. People displaced and migrating from rural to urban areas with no resources, skills or social networks at their destination, are targeted by agents and / or traffickers in Dhaka or Kolkata. A case study from Accra in Ghana showed that after drought, the young men and women in northern Ghana were forced to migrate to major cities. The women worked as porters and are at risk of trafficking, sexual exploitation and debt bondage. At the same time, climate change has made children more vulnerable, flagged the IIED report. The report established the close relationship between lack of resources, alternative livelihoods, safety nets and the protection against loss and damage as well as debt and exploitation.

Scale of displacement

The report has been released a month ahead of the Conference of Parties (CoP26) United Nations climate summit in Glasgow, the United Kingdom. Over 216 million people could be internally displaced by 2050 across six regions due to climate change, according to World Bank estimates. Of these, over 81 per cent will be in Sub-Saharan Africa (86 million), East Asia and the Pacific (49 million) and the South Asian region (40 million). As many as 55 million people were internally displaced within their countries due to extreme weather events in 2020. This is the highest in the last one decade. This would be in addition to the existing 40.3 million people living under slavery in the world. NICEF has repeatedly warned that climate change increases the risk of girls being pushed into unsafe migration / displacement, which can expose them to the risk of modern slavery. Global climate frameworks including the Paris Agreement in 2015 and Cancu?n Adaptation Framework (CAF) in 2010 have acknowledged climate-induced migration and displacement. “This research too identifies climate change as a risk multiplier that makes people who are already vulnerable due to conflict or inequality more likely to become victims of modern slavery,” said Adéla Mackie, fellow, Anti-Slavery International.

Way ahead

Climate and development policy-makers urgently need to recognise that millions of people displaced by climate change are being, and will be, exposed to slavery in the coming decades, the IIED report flagged. Policymakers should therefore develop targeted actions, at national and international levels, to address the issue. The global and regional discourse on development and climate policy must consider trafficking and slavery risks due to climate shocks. Several ongoing initiatives — including the Warsaw International Mechanism Task Force on Displacement (WIM TFD), the Sendai Framework, etc — should be coordinated to increase understanding of, and response to, growing risks of climate-induced migration / displacement and exposure to modern slavery.

**3. West Bengal: COVID, climate change pushing Sundarbans women to distress**

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/14/india-covid-climate-change-pushing-sundarbans-women-to-distress>

In April last year, 17-year-old Rani Khatun, a resident of Sagar Island in the Sundarbans, would spend most of her day in school, preparing for the upcoming board exams. She wanted to be a teacher one day. Less than a year later, Khatun is a school dropout and a victim of domestic violence after a forced underage marriage. Sundarbans, the world’s biggest delta, is a 10,000 sq km (6,213 sq miles) dense forest of tidal mangroves, straddling India’s eastern coastline and western Bangladesh, opening into the Bay of Bengal. Crisscrossed by rivers, it is home to nearly 4.5 million people on the Indian side, with a large part of its population being subsistence farmers, dependent on fishing, paddy and betel leaf cultivation, and honey collection. Sagar Island, spread over 282 sq km (175 sq miles), is home to more than 200,000 people. The deltaic region saw large-scale migration of people to cities for work in 2009 after Cyclone Aila devastated the region, killing more than 300 people. But many had to return after they lost their jobs due to the coronavirus lockdown imposed in March last year. As they returned, another super cyclone, Amphan, ravaged Sundarbans in May 2020, killing more than 100 people. Even as COVID-19 restrictions were eased in June, the 46-year-old could not re-establish his tailoring business due to rampant poverty in the region, pushing the family into acute financial distress. Then came a marriage proposal for Khatun, with the groom’s family demanding little dowry. Though outlawed, the practice of dowry continues in the Indian subcontinent, in which money and expensive gifts are given to the groom’s family for marriage. Though Khatun was a minor who could not be married according to Indian laws, her family married her off. “The groom’s family didn’t demand any money. We thought by marrying off our daughter, we would have one person less to feed,” Khatun’s mother Nazula Biwi told Al Jazeera. However, Khatun was allegedly assaulted by her husband and in-laws and she came back within a month to her parents, who have ended up with a bigger liability – a debt of 80,000 Indian rupees ($1,104), which they had taken for their daughter’s marriage. Like Khatun, other young girls in the Sundarbans are also being forced into marriage due to poverty, worsened by climate change as recurrent storms and rising sea level lead to land loss and fall in farm productivity due to saline water intrusion. The COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in job losses and more poverty, has only aggravated the crisis.

Rise in underage marriages

According to UNICEF estimates, at least 1.5 million Indian girls below the age of 18 are married off every year and nearly 16 percent girls aged between 15 and 19 are currently married. After the pandemic and Cyclone Amphan hit the Sundarbans, reports suggest a substantial spike in the numbers. Laboni Singha Das, a representative of Childline India Foundation, a government-appointed coordinating agency focused on ending child marriages in West Bengal, said there has been an unusual spike in the cases of child marriage on Sagar Island alone in the last year. Das said she has rescued close to 50 girls from child marriages in less than a year after receiving tip-offs about their marriages. Once Childline is alerted to a child marriage through its helpline or other means, it intervenes to stop the marriage by going to the spot along with the police. Das attributed the spike in child marriages to the prolonged closure of schools due to the pandemic. With girls engaged more in housework, they got disconnected from education, she said. “The most vulnerable are those aged between 13-16 years.” Nihar Ranjan Raptan, secretary of Goranbose Gram Bikas Kendra, an NGO fighting child marriages in the region, said while four-five cases of child marriages were reported in the region every month, that number has gone up to eight to 10 since the pandemic. In June last year, the West Bengal Commission for Protection of Child Rights, a government body, set up a special team in association with various NGOs to deal with child marriages in the Sunderbans. Any case of child marriage could be reported over the phone or WhatsApp on a number provided by the agency. The government has also made it mandatory for the children forced into child marriages to be sent to rehabilitation centres for a minimum of 40 days. At these centres, the girls are offered psychological counselling, vocational training and, if needed, even enrolment in schools. Those who facilitated the marriage could be imprisoned for up to two years and fined 100,000 Indian rupees ($1,360).

Climate change and women

Faced with environmental degradation and resultant poverty, women suffer differently from men. They continue to remain marginalised and fall prey to child marriages, trafficking and domestic violence. “The evidence regarding the gendered effects of climate change is presently limited but there has been extensive research showing that when poor households in developing countries are hit by adverse economic shocks, women and girls suffer considerably more than men and boys,” said Zaki Wahhaj, co-director of Development Economics Research Centre at the University of Kent. Anurag Danda, a senior visiting fellow with think-tank Observer Research Foundation’s Energy and Climate Change Programme, said he will not “attribute incidences of child trafficking and marriages to Amphan or COVID alone”. “However, economic hardships have an ecological angle. As land turns saline or there are breaches of embankments, people lose land and economic hardships ensue. Also, with every generation, landholdings turn smaller as they get divided among scions. All this leads to a higher incidence of poverty and subsequently child marriages and trafficking,” he told Al Jazeera. A study by M Niaz Asadullah, Kazi Md Mukitul Islam and Zaki Wahhaj, published in the Journal of Biosocial Science, examined the reasons leading to child marriage in eight villages in the climate-affected areas of coastal Bangladesh. The study found that more than two-thirds of the respondents had encountered at least one event of a natural disaster before marriage. “These patterns suggest that climate change may be worsening the problem of child marriage in the Sundarbans region,” Wahhaj told Al Jazeera. Ajanta Dey, joint secretary of Nature Environment and Wildlife Society (NEWS), said the experience after Cyclone Aila showed that climate change affected women much more than men. “Be it in the form of trafficking or child marriage, women are first impacted due to climate change,” he said.

Hostile landscape

After Cyclone Aila devastated the region in 2009, submerging the nearby islands of Lohachara and Suparibhanga, Sagar Island became the home of a large number of climate refugees. After migrating to the island, more than 64 percent of its residents had to change their original livelihoods, according to a 2012 study. Nearly 20 percent of former farmers and more than 6 percent of fishermen became daily wage labourers, while 35 percent of people took to other jobs, said the study. While frequent storms cause extensive damage, the Sundarbans have also been witnessing a rapid loss of land for years due to a rise in temperature. “The waters of Bay of Bengal have been rising up to twice as fast as the global average at about 4.4-6.3mm a year as temperature in the region is rising faster than other regions,” said a 2018 study by climate physicist Chirag Dhara. The Sundarbans Delta is sinking at a rate of about 2-4mm a year, he said. Dhara added that the rise in sea levels around the Sundarbans at 8mm a year was nearly three times faster than the global average and as high as 12mm a year on Sagar Island. While rising sea continues to shrink habitable land in the region, the dreams of girls like Rani Khatun continue to get broken. She is back in school, but not sure if another storm will sink her ambitions again.

**4. West Bengal: Tiger widows of Sunderbans in the shadow of mangroves, tale of courage and hope**

<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/tiger-widows-of-sunderbans-in-the-shadow-of-mangroves-late-of-courage-and-hope-6268496/>

It was an unusually cold February morning when Shanti Das saw her husband for the last time. Days after Saraswati puja, the yearly invocation of the goddess of learning in most Bengali Hindu households, 50-year-old Gopal Das left his village, Joygopalpur, in a boat to hunt for crabs deep in the forests of Sunderbans. “I remember asking him to take an extra shawl. Generally, by February end, winter is on its way out. But that was not the case this year,” says Shanti (45).

Five days later, Shanti got a call from an unknown number. “It was the police. They called to say my husband had been mauled to death by a tiger that morning. Just like that, my world came crashing down,” says Shanti.

According to the West Bengal Forest Department, 20 people were injured and 24 killed by tigers in the last 18 years in South 24 Parganas, where the Sundarban Tiger Reserve is located. However, it’s important tonote that a number of such deaths are not reported because people killed are often hunting illegally in the forests. A report by National Centre for Coastal Research in 2018 points out that West Bengal lost maximum land due to coastal erosion in the country (99 sq km between 1990 and 2016). Between 1969 and 2009, about 210 sq km of landmass has eroded in the region. A report prepared by Jadavpur University and WWF has estimated that out of five million people living in the Sundarbans delta, one million will become climate change refugees by 2050. Which means, increasingly, human beings of the are encroaching on forest land. Making them vulnerable to such attacks.

“We have no other choice!”

We are in front of Shanti’s modest single-storeyed house. It looks like it has been painted recently. Shrubs of hibiscus dot the small patch of land in front of the house. A guava tree guards the entrance of the house. A half-built toilet stands a little away from the house.

Just a month before the incident, Shanti and Gopal had got their daughter married to a boy from a neighbouring village. The wedding feast was graced by “hundreds of guests”. Fish, meat and an assortment of sweetmeats were served at the feast. “We have a lot of debt. My son, who is in his early twenties, is working two shifts a day as a mechanic in Kolkata to pay off the debts,” says Shanti.

A five-minute walk down a slushy lane from Shanti’s house takes us to Pushpa Biswas’s thatched hut. Outside, dusk falls upon the Sunderbans like black,velvety curtain. Pushpa, 48, switches on the lone bulb in her one-room dwelling and holds up a picture of her husband, Sisir Biswas, who was mauled to death by a tiger about a year ago. “He tried but was a very poor farmer. He just didn’t know how to till the land. He was a woodcutter but now everything is machinised. He went to Kerala to be a contruction worker but came back withing months. There too he almost lost his life in an accident at the site. But death was following him. He went to collect honey from the forest and that’s when a tiger attacked him,” says Pushpa.

Standing up and confronting fears

At the sprawling vocational centre of the Joygopalpur Gram Vika Kendra, Sabitri Mondol, 40, is showing us the a “kimono” that volunteers from Denmark taught her to make. It’s more of a robe really, but the beaming confidence in Sabitri’s face stops us from correcting her. She lost her husband in a tiger attack a few years ago, the very mention of which still makes her “feel lost”. “It’s like every other story you will hear here. He went to collect crabs and didn’t come back. I did not even get to see his body,” says Sabitri.

The West Bengal government claims that since 2009, 100,000 women are being trained to be independent through vocations such as embroidery, bee-keeping, tailoring, etc.

Biswajit Mahakur, secretary of Joygopalpur Gram Vikash Kendra, points out that financial independence is just the first step in the process of rehabilitation. “We have to realise that these people have no choice. These are some of the poorest areas of the state. Since most of farmers here grow only one crop a year, they are also jobless for a large chunk of the year,” says Mahakur.

With an income of INR 5000 per month, she is the only earning member of her family. “I am supporting my son and my parents. My son, who is a teenager now, is looking for a job in Kolkata. We have to take care of ourselves, we can’t depend on the government for help,” says Sabitri, who says she got no compensation from the government. “Since most of their husbands go for hunting illegally, they are scared to pursue for any kind of compensation,” says Mahakur.

Yet, there are many like Kirti Das, who lost three members of her family in a tiger attack, who feel that education and self-dependence is her only way out of this “hell”. “My father and my brother were mauled by tigers. A few years after my marriage, I lost my husband too. I couldn’t sit around and mope. I had to do something to make sure my young daughter at least is saved from this hell,” says Kirti. Today, seven years after losing her husband to a tiger attack, Kirti runs a tailoring shop from her house and trains other women in her village too. “When I started off, I used to make about ten bloouses a week. Now, I can easily make about 200 blouses. I can also make nighties and gowns. I want my daughter to complete her college education so that she can do something substantial in the city,” says Kirti.

Victims of climate and political crisis

When Amitava Chowdhury, a Kolkata-based doctor who has been volunteering in various dispensaries across the Sunderban area for the past two decades, is asked about the tiger attacks, he waves his hand off in dismissal. “Tigers are not the main enemy of the people here. Apathy is. There is not a single decent hospital in this area. There are no proper educational institutions here. In fact, there is only one higher secondary school in this whole area. How are these people expected to lead a better life here?” he asks.

Indeed, since this is one of the poorest regions of the state, and indeed the country, many women here are at risk of being trafficked.

In 2017, India’s National Crime Records Bureau in its annual report said there were 8,132 cases involving human trafficking in the country, with 3,579 recorded in Bengal alone. “If the government, both central and state, doesn’t do something about this apathy, the women of Sunderbans will continue to suffer,” says Chowdhury.

**5. West Bengal: The Government recently raised the compensation for tiger widows to Tk300,000 in case of death, and Tk100,000 in case of serious injury**

<http://www.tbsnews.net/features/panorama/she-was-married-twice-sundarbans-tigers-killed-both-her-husbands-301687>

One day, in the early 1990s, her husband Charan Sardar, a fisherman, went into the waterways in Sundarbans with others from Jelepara. On that fateful day, a tiger suddenly attacked the group. As Sundarbans tigers are not water-shy, the man-eater jumped on Charan in the water, sunk its teeth into his neck and dragged him into the jungle. Charan’s body was never found. After the news reached home, bereaved Sonamoni broke down at the loss of her beloved husband. Life of a widowed marginal woman has always been tough. But life turned upside down for Sonamoni when her mother-in-law blamed her for the loss of his son. “She said I was a curse for her family; that I was an ill-omened husband killer,” Sonamoni told us sitting in the narrow veranda of her tiny hut. With many such huts attached to each other in a small area, there is no way for fresh air to get in. Despite being adjacent to the world’s largest mangrove forest, her place was extremely hot. We were bathing in sweat as Sonamoni went on. “My in-laws evicted me from my home. I was forced to go back to my parents’ place,” Sonamoni said. “Back at my parents’ place, the wives of my brothers made the same accusations. They said I was a witch, an ill-omened husband killer. I would bring a curse to their families and kids.”

Sonamoni was expelled from her parents’ home too. She again returned to her in-laws. This time, Bharan Sardar, the younger brother of her deceased husband, who also was a fisherman, took pity on her. He married Sonamoni. By early 2000s, Sonamoni had four kids from two of her husbands. Life returned to its normal rhythm. However, 2002 was a tragic year for Jelepara as a whole. Sundarbans tigers killed several people from Jelepara that year. Bharan Sardar was one of them. The tiger jumped on Bharan just like it did on Charan, and dragged him deep into the forest. The body of Bharan, Sonamoni’s second husband, was also never found. Sonamoni’s mother-in-law was dead by now. So, she didn’t have to take the blame for ‘killing’ another of her sons. She instead had other worries – four extra mouths to feed. Sonamoni did any manual labour work she got and raised all her children. After two of her daughters were married off, Sonamoni started to live alone because the wives of her sons do not accept her into their families. Sonamoni has become a burden to the sons she raised through blood and sweat. Sonamoni is one of the more than 350 other tiger widows in Satkhira Shyamnagar, whose life has been shaped by the human-tiger conflicts. Most of these women live in social stigma, abject poverty, and some in absolute dirt. “Human-tiger conflicts in this region are responsible for the misery of these people,” said Ranajit Kumar Mandal, a monitoring officer at LEDARS, a local NGO in Satkhira Shyamnagar that, Ranajit said, worked with more than 500 tiger widows of Satkhira Shyamnagar and Khulna’s Koyra region for several years.

What causes human-tiger conflicts?

“Sometimes, in a certain area, a tiger becomes ferocious. Traditionally, people call them man eaters. In these instances, the same tiger keeps killing people for weeks,” Munirul H Khan, a professor of Zoology at Jahangirnagar University told The Business Standard. German biologist Hubert Hendrichs conducted research in the Sundarbans in the 1970s. Hendrichs found Sundarbans tigers drinking saline water is a contributing factor to their man killing tendency. According to Hendrichs, when the Sundarban tigers drink saline water, it may cause damage to their livers and trigger the unusual man eating behaviour. He categorised four types of tigers in the Sundarbans. Some are shy of human presence, some are circumstantial killers, some are opportunist man killers but mostly depend on natural game, and some tigers are compulsive man killers. He said 70% of the tigers are human shy, but the remaining 30% are responsible for human casualties in Sundarbans. However, ecologist Khasru Chowdhury claimed in an article that, “It is not the rate of salinity in water but forest quality, especially vegetation quantity, that is responsible for making a game killing tiger into a human-killer.” He mentioned various other reasons for tigers turning into man-eaters including, scarcity of substantial natural prey, the tiger being gum-infected, limb-injured, one-eyed, or scabies- infected, etc. A BBC report in 2011 mentioned that “it is thought that around 80 people are killed every year by the tigers on the Bangladeshi side of the Sundarbans forests.” In recent years, however, the government data shows that human-tiger conflicts have reduced in Bangladesh except, in 2020-21. The year witnessed a slight increase in human-tiger conflicts.

According to Bangladesh Forest Department (BFO) Tathya Konika 2020, the last large scale human casualty from tiger attacks was in 2011-12 (22 dead, 8 wounded), 2012-13 (16 dead, 1 wounded) and 2013-14 (5 dead, 1 injured). In the following three years, only one wounded victim was recorded. In 2019-20, there were no recorded cases of injury or killing by tigers. Khulna region BFO Forest Conservator Mihir Kumar Doe told The Business Standard that the casualties reduced because of “the government’s efforts through various initiatives like the formation of nearly 50 Village Response Team who preach awareness about tiger conservation and push back tiger if it intrudes into a village.” Munirul H Khan said one of the reasons tiger attacks have decreased in recent years is the decrease in tiger population. “Once hundreds of people were killed in tiger attacks but back then, there were hundreds of tigers too.” According to a tiger census in 2018, about 114 tigers remain in the Bangladeshi side of the Sundarbans. In the 2020-21 financial year, however, 3 people were killed and 1 injured in tiger attacks, Mihir Kumar Doe told TBS. What does it say about a sustainable solution to end the human-tiger conflicts? In his response, LEDER’s Ranajit Kumar Mandal didn’t sound very hopeful. “As more people are losing their livelihoods, many are increasingly dependent on the forests for living. The indiscriminate shrimp and crab cultivation in the area has reduced the scope of work for the local people. Since shrimp and crab cultivation require very few people to look after them, more local people are getting unemployed,” Ranajit said. “An agricultural land that would require 15 people to work in before requires two people after they are turned into shrimp and crab enclosures,” he added. More people in the forests could mean more casualties in the future, again.

Government aid doesn’t benefit the majority of tiger widows. Why?

The government pledged to assist the family of tiger victims with Tk100,000, if a loved one was killed, and Tk50,000, if a loved one was wounded, starting from the 2010-11. According to DFO, from 2011-12 to 2019-20, 46 people died and 16 were wounded in tiger attacks. In Jelepara, we talked to half a dozen such widows who lost their husbands to Sundarbans’ tigers. No one received any aid from the government as most of their husbands died in 2002. So, aid is not reaching hundreds who lost their loved ones during the tiger killing spree in the previous years. Recently the aid amount was increased to Tk300,000 for death and Tk100,000 for the wounded, said DFO’s Mihir Kumar Doe. The news is useful for future casualties. But it doesn’t help the widows of Jelepara.

The far reaching detrimental effects of tiger-human conflicts

Tiger widow Buli Dashi fights a totally different war. After her husband, Arup Mandal, died in a tiger attack in 2002, she raised three of her kids by sustaining on income from fishing and getting wood from the Sundarbans, like her husband. But a few years ago, local goons raped and murdered her elder daughter. She was only in class eight. Mother Buli Dashi, despite being helpless herself, has been fighting in the court for justice against the goons who are politically influential. The conflict with the tiger is ripping apart the lives of wounded men as well. Shuvash Shana, locally known as Takum, survived a tiger attack around five years ago. A tiger damaged his eyesight and its mighty bite on his shoulder made him partially paralyzed. He cannot work. Following the attack, Takum’s wife left with the kids. Takum now begs for food here and there. His mother Dino Dashi also lost her husband in the tiger attacks in 2002. Dino Dashi lives at the mercy of her daughters’ husbands. Jelepara residents, fully dependent on Sundarbans resources for livelihood, know they risk encounters with man-eaters in their part of Sundarbans. But when it comes to the question of securing the next meal, the risk becomes acceptable.

**6. West Bengal: ‘God played a cruel joke’: Cyclones have taken a toll on women in the Sundarbans**

<https://www.newslaundry.com/2020/12/19/god-played-a-cruel-joke-cyclones-have-taken-a-toll-on-women-in-the-sundarbans>

Sagarika Majhi’s life is punctuated by cyclones. It’s how she divides her story into different chapters. In 2010, Cyclone Aila devastated her village of Satjelia, lying in the centre of a ring of islands in West Bengal’s Sundarbans. Sagarika, 43, lost her farmland and ponds to the cyclone’s wrath and, as a result, her income from breeding catfish, parshe and tilapia. Sagarika and her husband, Kartick Kr Majhi, left the Sundarbans for Bengaluru, hoping to find work as construction workers. Kartick’s parents were put in charge of the pisciculture business, while their son Sushanta stayed to continue his schooling. In 2019, Cyclones Fani and Bulbul swept through the Sundarbans. Sagarika and Kartick were still in Bengaluru, earning around Rs 15,000 a month between them. The cyclones caused huge losses to our ponds, a lot of our fish died, totally damaging our business, Sagarika said. These jobs in Bengaluru were the only source of income at that time. Then, early this year, the Covid pandemic hit India. The couple’s construction site in Bengaluru closed down, leaving them without any income. No longer able to afford food or rent of Rs 3,000, Sagarika and Kartick, like lakhs of migrant workers across the country, left for home. It was a journey of 1,976 km, from Bengaluru to Visakhapatnam on foot, then a van to Kolkata, which cost Rs 10,000, and from Kolkata to Satjelia again on foot. It took them 10 days. Sagarika hoped to return to fish farming and scrape together a living. I had somehow managed to bring the pond back to life after last year’s devastation from Bulbul, she said. It was my only hope of earning something. On May 21, Cyclone Amphan struck the Sundarbans. Sagarika had already shifted to a storm shelter set up in the village’s solitary school the day before, along with almost everyone else in the village who lived in mud houses, like her. I saw the devastation with my own eyes, she said, describing how the Bidyadhari river, which flows from Nadia district to join the Raimangal river in the Sundarbans, moved with a force that she had never seen before. Winds were gushing in. Even sitting inside the school building, I felt like it would collapse. Even living through Cyclone Aila hadn’t prepared her for anything like this. Cyclone Amphan struck the shores of West Bengal with wind speeds of 150-155 kmph. In Satjelia, Sagarika’s pond was ruined, covered with branches and leaves. The fish she had so carefully reared, hoping to sell them for Rs 20,000, were dead. Amphan’s fury left thousands of women like Sagarika stranded, forced to rebuild their lives. In 2018, Kolkata’s Central Inland Fisheries Research Institute reported that 37 percent of the women in the Sundarbans depend on pisciculture the controlled breeding and rearing of fish to earn a living. They earn around Rs 7,400 a month. The basic socioeconomic structure of the Sundarbans is that while men are mostly involved in agriculture and odd jobs in the forest like cutting wood and gathering honey the women do jobs back in the village, of which pisciculture is an important part, said Arun Sarkar, a lifelong resident of Satjelia who works for the state tourism department as a guide, among other things. The frequent cyclones in the Sundarbans, therefore, put these livelihoods at risk.

After a cyclone, saline water enters the ponds where the fish breed, given the area’s proximity to the sea, said Ujjal Bhowmick, a professor at the Central Inland Fisheries Research Institute in Kolkata’s Barrackpore. This increases the pH level of the water, which reduces the oxygen content of the water. Due to this lack of oxygen, the fish die. Another issue is the debris left behind by cyclones on the surface of these water bodies. The dead branches and leaves release chemicals containing carbon into the water, which again reduces the oxygen content, thus killing the fish, Bhowmick said. Newslaundry met with some of these women, living on different islands in the Sundarbans, to understand what they went through. We saw our roof being blown away’ Tanima Majhi, 40, has lived in Satjelia for 20 years. She shares a two-room mud hut in Satjelia with her husband, their two daughters, and her husband’s parents. Her husband works as a driver in Kolkata, earning Rs 10,000 a month. He sends Rs 3,000 home, the rest going towards making ends meet in Kolkata. As a result, Tanima said, she has to handle the expenses of educating her daughters, Sonali, 14, and Sumana, 9. Like many others, Tanima too depends on pisciculture. She owns two ponds where she breeds different kinds of fish, including catfish, rohu, parshe and prawns. For catfish and parshe, she goes to the river once a month to catch them and releases them into the pond. Baby rohu and prawn larvae are bought in bulk and released into the ponds too. This, along with the cost of fishing equipment, fish bait, and so on, costs her between Rs 20,000 and Rs 25,000 per month. Tanima earns around Rs 30,000-35,000, giving her a profit of Rs 10,000, on average. But the past year has been especially tough, she said. Last year, I didn’t earn a single rupee from my fish harvesting, she said. In the summer, Cyclone Phani destroyed the fish. I managed to pull through but then, Bulbul struck in November. Tanima hoped that 2020 would be kinder to her. She took a loan of Rs 35,000 from a local mahajan, or moneylender, and spent the money on equipment and prawn larvae, refilling the pond with fresh water so that more fish could breed. But her optimism was short-lived: in May, Amphan destroyed her pond. All her fish were lost. Like many others in the Sundarbans, the family had moved into a local school that served as a storm shelter as the cyclone made landfall. From the school, they watched the devastation unfold across their village. My house was visible from the classroom where we were stationed, she said. We saw our asbestos roof being blown away by the force of the winds. When they returned to the house, it was completely flooded by rainwater.

All the food she had stored in the kitchen was ruined, and part of her house had completely collapsed. According to Tanima, party workers were dispatched to her village by the state’s Trinamool Congress government to rebuild her home. However, she hasn’t received any monetary relief. The government officials came and asked me an estimate of my damage and I informed them about everything but till now, I haven’t received a single penny, she said. I don’t know how I will repay my loan, she added, her eyes brimming with tears. I am extremely worried about myself and my daughters’ futures. The tiger widows Four years ago, Sandip Mondal left his house in Satjelia to collect crabs in one of the estuaries bordering the mangrove forests nearby. He had set up a trap the previous day, something he’d been doing his entire life. But Sandip never came home. A few days later, his body, or what was left of it, was retrieved from the forest by forest officials. It was marked by teeth and claws, the result of a tiger attack. I was in my home, cooking his favourite fish, when he was out, said his wife Neelima. He seemed disturbed for the past few days as there were fewer crabs caught in his net. I wanted to lift his mood that day. Sandip’s favourite meal remained uneaten. Neelima told Newslaundry: His body was absolutely tattered. They were only able to recover his torso. At first, I couldn’t believe it was him. Her voice filled with shock, she added, Everyday when he went to the forest, I prayed that he would come home alive. But over time I became accustomed to the dangers of the forest. So, when the news came of his death, I was shocked. The Sundarbans is home to 96 Bengal tigers. As of 2018, nearly 3,000 women here have lost their husbands to tiger attacks, referred to as tiger widows in the media. According to estimates, nearly 100 people die every year in the Sundarbans in tiger attacks. But what does this have to do with cyclones? Most of the Sundarbans forest area has protective fencing so tigers and humans do not come in close contact with each other, said Arun Sarkar. But these fences are often uprooted during cyclones, he said. Tigers then approach the villages, looking for freshwater sources. The fences are rebuilt, he added, but it’s not humanly possible to check whether 2,125 sq km of forest area across the Sundarbans is properly fenced. The fences Sarkar mentioned are put up by the state government, and the forest and wildlife department is responsible for their maintenance.

A department official said, on the condition of anonymity: Post Amphan, the fencing at three places Kultali, Sajnekhali, and Bidya was completely destroyed. Some were partly damaged in other islands bordering the forests. The official said the fences are made of nylon. When a strong storm comes, they are easily broken, he admitted, and tigers stray into the villages bordering the forests. They also attack people who come into the forest for their livelihoods. On average, it takes the government two or three months to repair all the fences after the cyclones. But the frequency of cyclones has increased so much that we have to use lower quality materials, he said. And hence, storms break them easily. In 2007, after Cyclone Sidr passed through the Sundarbans in November, there were as many as six tiger attacks. Dr Arun Bhar, a zoologist and a member of the Bengal Wildlife Society, an NGO based in kolkata, said tigers also stray into villages in search of food and water. The mangrove forests aren’t easy hunting ground: tigers can injure themselves on the protruding roots of the trees.

Hence, they look for easy prey, and that’s why they prey on humans, Bhar said. Importantly, cyclones also destroy the tigers’ sources of freshwater as saline water floods the rivers, making them undrinkable. The cyclones also kill deer and wild boar, the main prey of the tigers, Bhar explained. So, they stray to other areas in search of food and water, especially after a cyclone. As a result, the widows left behind now have to shoulder the responsibility of looking after their families. Neelima, for example, began working as a labourer in other people’s farms, earning around Rs 3,000 per month. When Amphan destroyed a majority of the farmland in the area, she had to find work as a construction labourer. I have to work to sustain my son’s education, she said. I want him to grow up and earn a living for himself and not struggle like me. An additional burden is that part of her mud house collapsed during Amphan, and she doesn’t have the money to repair it.

I somehow managed a quick fix with a tarpaulin cover, she said. Covering my child’s education is more important than rebuilding my house at the moment. Losses worth Rs 2 lakh Last year, Koushalya Mondal, 39, lost her husband and father-in-law to a tiger attack in an estuary bordering the Sajnekhali forest. It was shortly after Cyclone Fani hit the Sundarbans in May 2019, and Koushalya, her husband Arup Kr Mondal, and her father-in-law Anup Kr Mondal went to collect crabs from a trap set up near the estuary. I saw with my own eyes as the tiger jumped from behind and dragged my husband and father-in-law, she said, her voice filled with horror. I somehow saved myself. Since then, Koushalya has carried on her husband’s work alone, laying traps in the estuaries and collecting crabs. After catching the crabs, she releases them in her ponds, and then sells them to fish dealers. She usually earns around Rs 1-1.5 lakh per year, depending on the number of crabs. Her son, Amit, is a Class 12 student at Rahara Ramakrishna Mission School in Kolkata. When his school closed down due to the pandemic in March, Amit moved back home to stay with his mother. Amphan tore down a part of Kaushalya’s house, completely destroying her kitchen. She spent Rs 25,000 on repairs, but the greater loss is that of her livelihood. A coconut tree had fallen across her pond; it took almost 10 days to move, she said. By then, not a single crab was left available, she said, visibly shaken. Koushalya said she lost Rs 2 lakh worth of crabs. I thought God had finally smiled on me this year as I could have earned double the profit that I usually get, she said. But all God did was play a cruel joke.

**7. West Bengal: When the tiger ate her husband, the storm took away the employment, this is the story of the tiger widows of the Sunderbans**

<https://ourbitcoinnews.com/when-the-tiger-ate-her-husband-the-storm-took-away-the-employment-this-is-the-story-of-the-tiger-widows-of-the-sunderbans/>

First a tiger, then a storm. Life in the Sundarbans of West Bengal was not easy already. Lack of basic facilities. The danger of the tiger attack on Kadam Kadam. And now the storm of Amfan on him made a life here more difficult. The tiger widows’ of Sundarbans are forced to live a struggling life in such an environment. The woman whose husband was killed by the tiger. One such woman is Manjula Sardar. 45-year-old Manjula was destined to eat something for the first time after two days. That too a handful of puffed rice and jaggery. The desperation of losing everything is visible on the face. Just looking at the pond that has been filled with salty water after the storm. The Amfan storm that hit West Bengal a week ago not only killed all the fish in Manjula’s pond but also snatched the only livelihood from it. No first time a mountain of troubles has broken on Manjula. Seven years ago in 2013, the tiger killed her husband in the Gosaba area. Henceforth, fishes in the pond were the only means of earning. Nearby farms have also been ruined by the storm. Manjula and women like that are commonly called tiger widows’. Even before the storm changed life Manjula told that earlier too the storm had changed her life.

When the farms were destroyed due to Cyclone Aila, the husband was forced to start fishing. Meanwhile, the tiger attacked and killed them. After much struggle, a pond was allowed to be used for fisheries with the help of an NGO. Now Amfan also carried the storm. Many stories like Manjula More than 100 tiger widows’ of the Satjalia block of the Gosaba area lost their husbands to tigers in the last 15 years and the story is more or less the same. According to official figures, at least 52 people have died in tiger attacks between 2010 and 2017 in the Sundarbans region. Sheeba Sardar (40) is another tiger widow from Satjalia. He fears hunger more than a cyclone or human-tiger conflict. She used to do poultry farming. 100 chickens and 80 chickens were washed away in the storm. She says that whenever a disaster occurs in the Sunderbans, we have to start afresh. Sulata’s husband was killed by a tiger in front of his eyes Agricultural laborer Sulata says that after the Aila cyclone things had started to return to the track that the storm of Amfan ended everything. He said, Now we have to start everything afresh.

There is no cultivable land left and I have no means to raise a family. In 2011, her husband was killed by a tiger in front of her eyes. She says that many women who lost their husbands in tiger, crocodile and snake attacks moved to the city and found work there. When contacted, West Bengal Sundarban Affairs Minister Manturam Pakhira said that the government would look into the case of Sundarbans widows.