



Environmental Movement and the Conservation of Forest: A Case Study on Ratargul Swamp Forest of Sylhet, Bangladesh

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Author KMJ designed the study, wrote the protocol, managed the literature searches and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Author AFMZ has assisted to design the research tools making, interpreting the data and supervised the whole work. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Aims: The aim of this paper is to explore and analyze the scope and nature of the environmental movement that may shape the existing management.

Study Design: This paper is a qualitative study and based on empirical research. It focuses on the impact of environmental movements around Ratargul Swamp Forest

Place and Duration of Study: This research was done around the Ratargul Swamp Forest located in on Sylhet district of Bangladesh. The study period was from January 2016 to November 2017.

Methodology: For the primary data collection, 47 respondents were selected by using purposive sampling on the basis of their level of involvement. Data was collected from local people, environmental groups and the forest department. Data collection methods were key informant interview, in-depth interview, case study, focus group discussion and archival research.

Results: People of Ratargul village are now more aware of the harmful activities of uncontrolled tourism while the Forest Department brings new management policies and practices in response to

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the local and civil pressure. It is also found that the Climate Resilient Ecosystem Livelihoods (CREL) project in Bangladesh actually works to negate the strength of the environmental movement rather than as a conservation proponent. The Forest Department is successful to implement their projects due to a lack of coordination between local activists. According to the respondents, 31.1% mark this movement as successful, 23.4% opine as completely failure and while remaining 44.4% thinks that it is partially successful.

Conclusion: A strong, integrated, coordinated and organized form of resistance or movement is needed to break up the hegemony of Forest Department that may save the Ratargul Swamp Forest from ongoing damage.

Keywords: Environmental organizations; CREL; neoliberal development.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ratargul Swamp Forest of Sylhet District, Bangladesh, is one of the 22 freshwater swamp forests in the world [1]. Before 2012, it was almost unknown to the general public and even the Forest Department of Bangladesh was also unaware of its special characteristics and the potentials. After 27th September 2012, Anis Mahmud's photographs published by the Daily Prothom Alo [2], significant numbers of tourists started to visit this forest to enjoy its natural beauty. This led to a number of issues appear to the fore, which included the forest department levying gate fees as a new way to increase their income, uncontrolled and unregulated tourism activities, as well as a significant increase of tree logging. In addition, mismanagement by the forest department also attracted the attention of civil society groups, they called and demonstrated different types of agitation against Forest department and seek attention from political and government personnel which we framed here as environmental movements that engage in the persuasion of saving Ratargul Swamp forest. Environmental activists and civil society have noted these new issues are linked with a new model of forest expropriation. It was on the 23rd of April 2014, when a group of concerned citizens protested by advocating to increase awareness about the new activities of forest department like building 'watch Tower' in the name of conservation of this forest [3]. They formed and involved a number of environmental groups to raise awareness about the issues facing the forest. As a response to these protests, government introduced a new management system to the Ratargul Swamp Forest that was CREL (Climate- Resilient Ecosystems and Livelihood) project, funded by USAID and implemented by Winrock International, as an initiative to conserve the forest environment in the name of co-management [4]. But the environmentalists

rejected this management initiative, because of previous experiences from co-management projects in other forested areas of Bangladesh, such as the experiences of Nishorgo and IPAC in Lawachara National Park, Rema-Kalenga Wildlife Sanctuary and Satchari National Park where the initiatives were very much criticized by both activists (some activists also actively participated in this movement) and academics [5]. The CREL authorities and CREL committee view this type of management strategy as a big success, whereas most of the local people and activists perceived it as a government's neo-liberal strategy that aimed to weaken the local environmental movement and to preserve the status quo. Nevertheless, the Government of Bangladesh implemented a CREL project in 2013. CREL started their activities with the full support and assistance from the forest department and they left by 2018 dividing local and forest people into different groups to (CREL people, anti-CREL people, Skeptics, local environmentalists) kick out civil society based environmentalists groups from the scene.

This paper is an effort to investigate the scope and nature of the local environmental movement regarding Ratargul Swamp Forest that (re)shapes existing management practices. It shed lights on the nature of organizations, forms, process and strategies of the environmental movement around Ratargul Swamp Forest. It aims to know the actions, reactions and negotiations among different stakeholders during the Ratargul protection movement.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Study Area and Population

Ratargul is a freshwater swamp forest situated at Fatehpur union under Gwainghat upazilla in Sylhet District, Bangladesh. It is situated at latitude 25°00.025'N and longitude

91°58.180'E.29. It contains total 504.50 acres of forest area which was announced as a "Special Biodiversity Conservation Area" by the People's Republic of Bangladesh on 31 May, 2015. The type of eco-tourism going on Ratargul called 'community-based ecotourism' [6]. Ratargul swamp forest is locally known as 'The Sundarbans of Sylhet'. The origin, development and existence of Ratargul swamp forest are totally water-based. The source of this water is Chengerkhal River. Biodiversity of Ratargul swamp forest contains 73 species of trees, 26 species of mammals, 20 species of reptiles, 175 species of birds, 9 species of amphibians [7] and 94 species of fishes among which 63 are survived and 28 species are threatened [8]. It also contained around 73 species of trees [7].

There are 9 villages located around Ratargul Swamp Forest, consists 1321 families and 8267 people. Among them, 22 people were purposively selected for IDI and Case study on the basis of their level of involvement to the movement. This study focused on the native people's involvement in local environmental movements (activities like human chain, hunger strike, meeting, seminar, tree bagging, mass-emailing send, oushodisnan (iconic bath with nim tree for mental healing, etc.)) related to the

Ratargul Swamp Forest. Further key informants included environmentalists (n=7) of various organizations (i.e. Bangladesh Poribeshbadi Andolon (BAPA), Ratargul Jolarbon Songrokkhon Committee (RJSC), Bhoomishontan Bangladesh (BB), Ratargul Shobuj Biplob Shomity (RSBS), Green Explore Society (GES), Pradhikar, and Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA), are interviewed. Besides KII we conducted in-depth interviews and case studies of 11 activists from different organizations, government employees (n=4), and academics (n=3) who are involved or respond to the movements. In total 47 respondents were purposively selected for the primary data collection.

2.2 Methods and Tools of Data Collection

The study period was from January 2016 to November 2017. Data were collected via 25 in-depth interviews (IDI) and 7 key informant interviews, conducting 10 case studies and 2 focus group discussions scheduled with a checklist. Observation was mainly used for cross-checking the information and archival research (to collect news related to the movement, online activities of the respondents) also being used for this study.

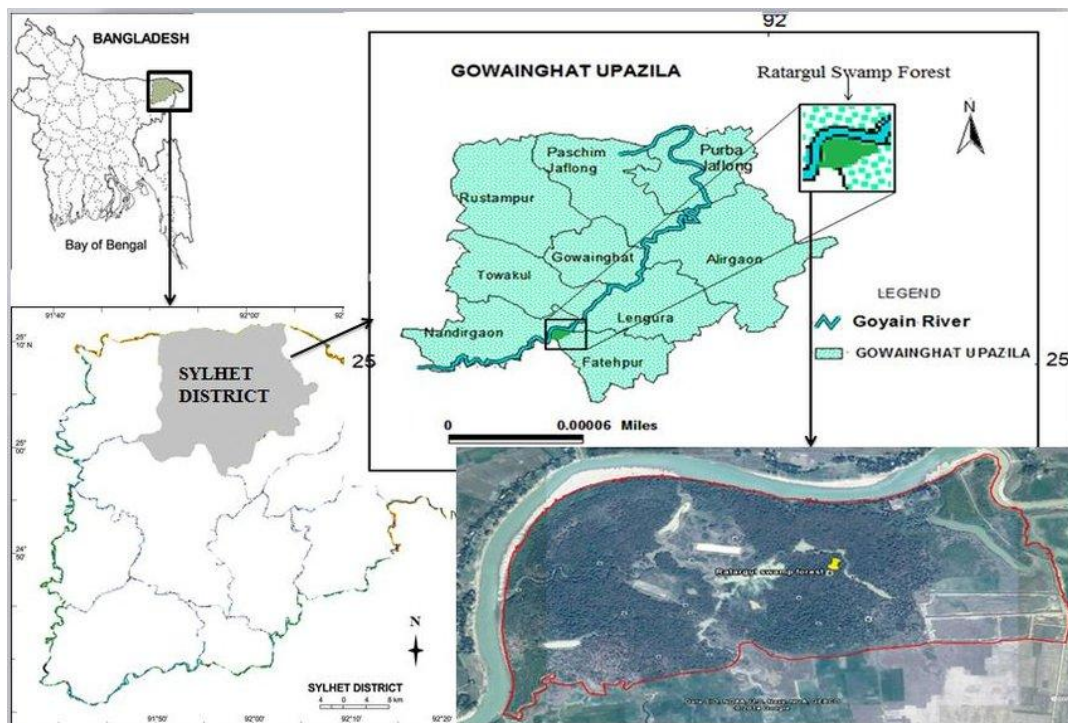


Fig. 1. Map of Ratargul Swamp Forest [9]

To elucidate the environment in which the movements operate, aspects related to organizations, forms, strategies and processes, feelings of the activists, and their expressions regarding protests activities and government decisions about the forest are the subject of investigation.

2.3 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed by following 'Grounded-theory approach' [10]. Data analyzed by sorting them according to the theme and objectives of the study. Case studies and focus group discussions were recorded by audio recorder and then transcribe to analyze. Archival data also used and interpreted.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Organizations, Forms, Strategies and Process of the Movement

During the study period, we find that all seven organizations (local and national) work on a volunteer basis. The movement was started by the organizations like *Bangladesh Poribeshbadi Andolone* (BAPA), Green Explore Society (GES), *Pradhikar*, and Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA). In the beginning, it was limited within the member of civil society. Later they included local people and then some new organizations were formed which are *Ratargul Jolarbon Songrokkhon Committee* (RJSC), *Bhoomishontan Bangladesh* (BB) and *Ratargul Shobuj Biplob Shomity* (RSBS). These organizations included both local people and environmentalists to reach their goals to conserve Ratargul Swamp Forest.

The first step of the movement was initiated with some meeting and seminars arranged by BAPA, BELA and later they included other environmental organizations GES and Pradhikar to increase their support. But they felt that these were not enough until they include the local people who are actual beneficiaries of the forest. *Ratargul Jolarbon Songrokkhon Committee* and *Ratargul Shobuj Biplob Shomity* were formed when local people become aware of the importance of the conservation of the forest and then they involved directly. *Ratargul Jolarban Songrokkhone Nagorik Uddog* (online public group in Facebook, 1261 members) and *Bhoomishontan Bangladesh Group* (Followed by 2089 peoples) were formed as an online public

group in Facebook to make more people aware about the seriousness of this movement. They shared the updates of their activities, feelings, invited people to join with them, spread awareness-building slogans and pictures regarding Ratargul Swamp Forest. They also used awareness stickers on their personal vehicles, published calendars and shopping bags using slogans like, 'Save Ratargul, Save Life', 'keep forest like what it is', 'Save Ratargul, Give Tree Begs', 'Stop This Demons, Save Ratargul', etc. to raise awareness and gather support.

The second step for environmental movement regarding Ratargul swamp forest was against the leasing system of its water reservoir, by arranging a village citizen meeting. One of the main focuses of the protests of the environmental activists was to stop construction of watchtower. They even questioned the forest department about their consciousness and activities to protect the land of the forest. They also demanded for controlling the flux of tourists in a planned way into the forest by implementing restricted tourism, rescue the land seized by the local elite, stop any kinds of construction in the forest area, restrict the entry of engine boats and using multiple routes to visit the forest, identify core and buffer zone of the forest and restrict the core zone from tourism to protect the animals, stop illegal fishing and poisoning for the purpose of catching fish, follow international ecotourism policy to conserve this special forest from waste thrown by the tourists and their environment unfriendly activities like throwing stone to the forest animals, shouting, playing music's at a high volume, implement 'equal distribution of benefits on the basis of co-operation' instead of implementing any exported management project. Environmental activists continued peaceful protests against governments several decisions regarding this forest. Environmental organizations continued their peaceful protests by arranging human chain, hunger strike, meeting, seminar, tree begging, mass-emailing and mass-application sent to the forest department and Ministry of forestry of Bangladesh government, etc. They also arranged an iconic bathing ritual with then the Minister of the ministry of environment and forest to change the attitude of the government towards Ratargul water bodies. But being continuously rejected by government and Forest Department to accept their claims, they become hopeless and their force of activity had slowed down gradually. On the year 2016, few organizations were found active. They arranged seminar, press conference, 'eco-tour'

with the purpose of providing their members a practical idea regarding the conservation and strategy of ecotourism, wastage collection program to clean the forest and make local people aware about this. They also conducted an awareness program for the boatmen about how they can conserve the forest and guide tourists in a conservative way.

Environmental activists continued to visit that place, again and again, to see its condition and tried to convince local people who are related to this forest aware about its importance and attempted to build awareness on over-using the forest. In most of the cases, they endured the expenses related to activism, refusing grants from the wealthy agents. Moreover, some group's activism was found online. On every Friday, activists made a visit in Ratargul Swamp Forest and they cleaned the garbage thrown by the tourists. When local people become assured about their modest feelings for the forest, they extended their helping hand to them. Local people joined the movement by participating in different protest activities like human chain in front of Sylhet Central Shohid Minar (Martyr Tomb), cordoned the office of bit officer in the Ratargul swamp forest and divisional forest officer near Kin Bridge, tree-begging program of *Bhoomishontan* Bangladesh and also helped by providing bamboos and other stuffs to plant the collected trees to the nearby area of the forest. They also participate in the garbage collection activities being trained by a movement organizer. Boatman's, who guided tourists to the forest with their boat, became aware of throwing wastes to the water and they started to collect the wastes from water and keep it in their boat. Most importantly, they had begun questioning the activities of the Forest Department.

3.2 Reactions and Negotiations

From the beginning, the forest department denied the claims of activists. Forest Department implemented a project titled 'Ratargul wildlife sanctuary development project' by Ministry of Environment and Forestry of 536 lakh BDT most of which were spent for the construction of watchtower, bit office, park office, kitchen for tourists rest house, computer, TV, solar panel and AC. It also includes CNG gas, engine boats and engine driven local boats [11]. In front of continuous resistance of environmental organizations, they completed the construction of watchtower in the middle of the forest and handed over the management of the forest to the

Winrock International to implement CREL project. It increased the flow of the tourists' movement. Forest Department initially offered money/bribe to the protesters when they failed they introduce co-management plan under CREL project in the name of Ratargul Development in September 2015, but they were rejected. CREL was a five-year project which worked for making an understanding between the government and local people. CREL authority formed 10 Village Conservation Groups, 1 People Forum, 1 co-management committee (CMC) and a co-management council. CREL work in Ratargul swamp forest from September 2015 to October 2017. Within this time they tried to convince the local people and divert them from environmental movement to co-management by showing financial facilities. Now, the local people split between CMC and not CMC, where the majorities are CMC supporters.

Long before CREL, villagers of Ratargul worked spontaneously for the conservation of the forest even other villagers gave different look on their conservation activities. But after the implementation of CREL project in 10 villages of that area; nine villagers other than Ratargul village participated with the new activities of CREL at the very beginning. CREL people first gathered villagers from other villages then Ratargul and included local powerful elites to their committees who can influence the villagers. They also extended financial help to the people who can divert people from the movement. CREL and forest department arranged meetings with local people to make them understood about the benefits of co-management.

It took two years to manage desired members for CMC from Ratargul village to complete the co-management committee. Getting continuous pressures and temptations, villagers became confused and divided into different groups. Some people, who opposed to the co-management, also conceived jail for the 'false' case filed by the forest department. A group of people had changed their role from the movement activists to CREL worker and even some were played role for the both sides. Everything is now under control of CREL. 'Voice of the people', was not heard any more and their voices got down in front of the shouting of CREL supporters. Continuous rejection of environmentalist's demands threw local people in hopelessness; they believe, it might be better for the forest if they stay away from any protests activity. Even 23.4% of the respondents think that the

movement is completely a failure where 29.8% and 42.6 % of respondents call it respectively successful and partially successful. Though they were disappointed but they are not totally motionless. Awareness activities are still in the field.

In 2017, Besides CREL, Forest Department came with a new plan entitled "Sustainable Forestry and Livelihood" (SUFAL) where some strategies were adopted like controlling the number of tourist, diverting routes, uses of watchtower, core and buffer zone demarcation. Forest Department claims, all of these strategies were adopted from the proposals of environmental activists and a response to the opinions of local people but activists and local people sounded as these were eyewash.

4. CONCLUSION

There are a number of examples of successful movement in protecting the environmental degradation in Bangladesh. As an example "the Phulbari resistance" in Borogram, Phulbari sub-districts (Upazila), Bangladesh, can be named. This resistance was started from the estimation of the economic loss of the country and the environmental threat to rivers and the water supply caused due to the mining project in Phulbari. This protest was successful and they halt the mining project [12]. The twinge history of the environmental movement in Ratargul is experienced directly by local people, Government/Forest Department and it has also impact on the management of swamp forest. By deploying CREL and SUFAL projects Forest Department tried to control the movements and divert local people's perceptions regarding Ratargul Swamp Forest Management and retained the control over the forest. CREL and SUFAL (like other USAID projects MACH, Nishorgo, IPAC) projects are nothing but new in forms and objectives. They just divided people and created supporters and clients from the protesters and managed the existing expropriation and appropriation of profit from the forest instead of protecting the environment. So the activities adopted by the Forest Department can be well described by a widespread Vietnamese saying that these initiatives are as 'old wine in new bottles' [13]. Our study revealed that the Forest Department was successful in controlling the movement due to the lack of integration and coordination between the activists and organizations in breaking the power nexus of Forest Department and development

projects and programs. Thus a strong, integrated, coordinated, organized and continuous form of resistance or movement is needed to shatter the hegemony of Forest Department that may save the Ratargul Swamp Forest from ongoing damage.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

All participants were selected fairly. An adequate, complete and understandable written consent form was approved by the respondents. Privacy of the data was highly protected and respondents had their right to ask any kinds of question regarding the research. There was written agreement with the patronizer of the research.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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