

Global Warming: Threat to Sundarbans and the Silence of Indo-Bangladesh Mass Media

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Abstract: The Sundarbans or the ‘beautiful forest’ is a cluster of low-lying islands in the Bay of Bengal, considered as one of the natural wonders of the world, which is facing the problem of global warming since the past few decades. Global warming, climate change, increasing water level and salinity of the river as well as inlet areas are some recognized threats to the Sundarbans. This is threatening species survival, the health of natural systems and causing extinction of biodiversity. This study is a modest attempt to examine the factors because of which the burning issues of Sundarbans are almost excluded from the attention of the media in India as well as Bangladesh. This is despite the fact that various initiatives have been taken by the governments and at the private level in these two countries to conserve the Sundarbans ecosystem. The research paper summarizes findings of newspaper reports on Sundarbans, from Earth Day to World Environment Day 2017 (22 April to 5 June) of two reputed broadsheets dailies i.e. *The Daily Prothom Alo* (Dhaka, Bangladesh) and *The Ei Samay Sangbadpatra* (Kolkata, India). The youngest member of the mass communication family, the film has also been included in this paper. This is because the joint production of the two Bengali film industries has already made a lot of cinema. There is going to be more in the near future, where many issues of India and Bangladesh are getting priority, but the destruction of Sundarbans has never been the subject of any such media intervention.

Keywords: global warming, Indo-Bangladesh, mass media, Sundarbans.

1. Introduction

The Sundarbans mangrove forest is known for its high species diversity. This World Heritage Site (UNESCO, 1987) coastal wetland is known for its natural beauty which is flourished by crocodiles, birds, deer, fish,

people, rivers, river dolphins, snakes, trees, creeks and the *bonbibi* rituals where the ultimate feather in its cap is the Bengal tiger. Shared by India and Bangladesh, the unique Sundarbans forest located in the delta of Padma, Brahmaputra and Meghna river basins, extends across North & South 24 Parganas of West Bengal (India) and Khulna, Satkhira, Bagerhat districts of Bangladesh. The history of the Liberation War of Bangladesh, sharing of water resource of River Teesta, the Rampal Power Plant, Silver Hilsa, the Rights of Bengali Language, Rabindranath and Nazrul - all these factors have tied Indo-Bangladesh together, and one of the strongest connection is the Sundarbans. But in the present day, the Sundarbans have faced a dangerous warning due to global climate change. With rising sea levels, the islands here are disappearing (The Independent, 2006). For example, according to the School of Oceanographic Studies in Calcutta, satellite images have shown that the south of *Hariabhanga*, which is known as New Moore Island of India and the South *Talpatti* Island of Bangladesh, has completely submerged underwater (BBC, 2010). Another nearby island named *Lohachara*, was submerged in 1996 and almost half of the area of *Ghoramara* Island is now underwater. The latter had a population of 40,000 individuals and as of 2016, the island was inhabited by 3,000 residents (NPR, 2016). Simultaneously, increasing salinity of the water and soil in this region has severely threatened the health of mangrove forests. Frequent cyclones like 2009 Aila and erratic monsoon raining pattern are also damaging the ecology and humanity of the Sundarbans (Priyadarshini, 2006).

Sometime in the nineteenth century, the concept of global warming and the need for conserving nature around the world began to become clear (Singh, 2013). At that time, enlightenment about environmental issues was being developed rapidly with the research of Swedish chemists Svante Arrhenius, who was the first to claim that fossil fuel combustion may result in enhanced global warming (Enzler, n.d.). He proposed that the presence of carbonic

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acid in the air and a doubling of the CO₂ concentration could lead to 5°C rise in the global average surface temperature of the Earth due to the increased concentration of greenhouse gases (Arrhenius, 1896). Another global warming expert Stephen Schneider also predicted the adverse impact of global warming on the world in 1976. Finally, in 1988 it was acknowledged that the global climate was much warmer than 1880 (Maslin, 2004). Subsequently, after fully understanding the importance of nature conservation and the need to protect nature from the adverse impacts of global warming, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was founded by the World Meteorological Organization and the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP). The 19th Principle of the 26 policies of Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (UNEP, 1972) focuses on Environmental Education. It talks about creating environmental awareness among the young generation and in adults. For doing so, the presence of mass media and media campaigns is an important requirement. It is since then that mass media started entering into the global environment arena, of which the Sundarbans is an integral part.

As is true for most neighbouring nations, there are several initiatives between India and Bangladesh with regards to preventing the destruction of the mangrove ecosystem. At the national and international level in these two countries, various aspects of nature conservation have been strengthened in order to protect the Sundarbans. Large number of programmes and projects are being undertaken at the Government and Private level to save the mangrove, among which encouragement of ecotourism, mangrove plantation, creating an alternative source of livelihood are notable. Indo-Bangladesh researchers are continuously carrying out research to save the Sundarbans. But curiously in all the initiatives to save the Sundarbans, the media of these two states - especially the Bengali newspapers and the film industry where the interest of the general people are deeply hidden - is virtually silent.

2. Silence of Indo-Bangladesh Mainstream Bengali Newspapers and Films

2.1. Newspapers

Edmund Burke, Member of Parliament (1766-1794) of the House of Commons with Whig Party stated that after the country's Legislative Assembly, Executive and Judiciary, the Press is the 'Fourth Estate' or 'the fourth pillar'. The Press is the mouthpiece of national philosophy and public opinion (Aggarwal and Gupta, 2001). Burke further highlighted that the press has a role to play in the formation of the state and in the

transformation of the society. But after making a detailed analysis of the newspapers of both India and Bangladesh, it can be deduced that the newspapers of both the countries are active to protect the local environment, but are virtually non-starters when it comes to creating public awareness on relevant national as well as international environmental issues, like the destruction of the Sundarbans. The methodology for this paper is such that an information analysis was carried out from Earth Day (22 June) to World Environment Day (5 June) of two major newspapers in the year 2017. The two newspapers are 'Prothom Alo' (Dhaka Edition) and 'Ei Samay' (Kolkata Edition). The total number of news articles published in both these newspapers on Sundarbans during the study period (44 days) is 10, out of which 8 were published in 'Prothom Alo'.

Table 1: News on Sundarbans in The Daily *Prothom Alo* (Dhaka) (22/04/2017 - 05/06/2017).

Date	Headline
22/04	<i>The Sundarbans claim to be declared a risky World Heritage</i> <i>Instead of Rampal, it is necessary to set up power plants in alternative places</i>
29/04	<i>UNESCO observes the government initiative to protect the Sundarbans</i>
06/05	<i>Rampal's pollution will kill 150 people a year</i>
21/05	<i>UNESCO proposes to take the Sundarbans to a risky list</i> <i>The claim of cancellation the Rampal project</i>
05/06	<i>Prime minister was on the occasion of World Environment Day</i> <i>Dangers in salt are increasing in Khulna and Satkhira</i>

Table 2: News on Sundarbans in The *Ei Samay Sangbadpatra* (Kolkata) (22/04/2017-05/06/2017).

Date	Headline
06/05	<i>The mangrove downstream is going on</i>
18/05	<i>...the excitement of the Sundarbans pollution</i>

According to preliminary quantitative analysis, 'Prothom Alo' plays a leading role in the society, but the amount of coverage it gives to the issues of Sundarbans is far from satisfactory. After carrying out a little in-depth analysis, it is found that out of the total eight news articles of 'Prothom Alo', four are published on the two special 'environmental days' (22/04 and 05/06), when there is a high probability to transmit environmental news by the media. Such new coverage on special days are largely

dependent and a result of some or the other initiative by the Government often owing to international announcements. Further, 60 percent of the media coverage is focused on discussing the adverse environmental impact of the Rampal Power Plant. Another newspaper 'Ei Samay' which has been introduced in 2012, has not played any significant role to raise awareness about the issues of the Sundarbans during the time period studied. This newspaper was found to not even have utilized the special 'environment days' to disseminate information or idea for the conservation of the Sundarbans.

2.2. Film Industry

In many cases, India has maintained good friendship with Bangladesh, and the joint production cinema has played an important role in this friendship (The Hindu, 2003). Since the 1980s, the collaboration of Tolly-Dhallywood has gained huge popularity, especially after 2010. Due to this joint production, many mainstream films like *Padma Nodir Majhi*, *Shankhachil*, *Moner Manush*, *Doob: No Bed of Roses* are continuously made and screened for cinema lovers in both these countries. Moreover, the presence of various well-known production houses like *Jaaz Multimedia*, *Eskay Movies*, *Impress Telefilm Ltd*, *SVF Entertainment*, *Viacom 18 Motion Pictures*, etc. has enriched Indo-Bangladesh film industry considerably. However, cinema lovers in these two countries will not be able to find any films regarding the Sundarbans. *Nandan*, a Government-sponsored Film and Cultural Centre in Kolkata, organised Bangladesh Film Festival 2018 where several films such as, *Aynabaji*, *Guerrilla*, *Amar Bondhu Rashed*, etc. were selected to be screened. In addition to this, an exhibition of rare photographs based on the liberation war has been selected as the theme of films in near future. However, there is no mention of any documentary or initiative regarding Sundarbans in this huge activity. Nevertheless, film critics and experts in these two countries are repeatedly defensive about this youngest member of the mass media family. However, the Film industry in these two countries (mainly Bengal and Bangladesh) should not only focus on business interests but also in carrying out effective transformation of the society by engaging and educating people. After all that is also one of the roles that the Film industry must play in the successful building of any nation (Naurla, 2008).

3. Possible Reasons for the Silence of the Media

The advent of globalization in the 21st century and ensured that the media is providing its services to the public and the same is being consumed by the masses every second. In such a scenario, there must be some reasons behind the silence of mainstream media on the

issue of the destruction of the Sundarbans. To transform the society for its betterment and manifest the truth is the main objective of mass media. However, it seems that the main objective of media houses, at least in this context, has become purely of business. In the hope of making quick profits, without having to make much investment, the same old information is being re-disseminated by the print and the film media which is easily able to influence the general public. There are hardly any efforts that are being made to change the thinking of individuals or the society at large, and no attempts are being made to move people out of their comfort zones even amidst the wake of the ongoing climate crisis. For every media house (newspaper or film production house), there are certain readers or viewers who are familiar with and agree with the ideas aired by the respective media house. So, if a new concept is raised, then the potential grasp and influence on the recipient may change in either direction. Therefore, because of the already deep interest of the people in issues like politics, sports, entertainment and criminal issues, the media continues to delay in making efforts towards raising awareness for now emerging issues like the ongoing environment crisis.

Secondly, due to the economic condition of Bangladesh and India, many people in these two countries continue to live below the poverty line. As a result, as is true for other third world countries, people and media houses are not much bothered about the impact of environment on the lives of individuals. Therefore, the media is perhaps hesitant to explore the need for raising environmental awareness in Bangladesh and in certain parts of India. Thirdly, the total number of journalists trained or deputed to cover environmental issues is inadequate and it was found that the ones that exist lack both motivation and training. Environment being a now emerging issue, requires a degree of understanding before journalists can get involved and report issues related to this field. In the Annual Report of UNEP and in 'UNEP Programmes and Resources for Environmental and Training - An Introductory Guide' (2004), it has been repeatedly highlighted that with the help of journalists, the media is able to influence the general public (UNEP, 2006). The role of media in environmental awareness is thus critical and needs to adequately appreciated and utilized. So primarily in every country, there is a need and special requirement for conducting conferences, workshops and training camps for journalists on the broad theme of how (and why) to cover environmental issues.

In other cases, internal problems of the states is also an important factor affecting mass media involvement in covering the issues of Sundarbans. According to

environmentalist Subhash Dutta, the central and state governments have blamed each other more than once in the hearing of the Sundarbans pollution case (*Ei Samay*, 18 May 2017). According to the newspaper report of *Prothom Alo*, the Head of the South African company Timber's Watch, Wally Man is of the view that Bangladesh has Sundarbans, which is the biggest helper to combat climate change. But Bangladesh is threatening themselves into danger by creating a power project (*Prothom Alo*, 29 May 2017) which may affect the Sundarbans. Although UNESCO has agreed to cancel the implementation of this project, but the Government of Bangladesh has rejected this cancellation. After analyzing media reports, it has been seen that the Government itself is hesitant to make a decision on this matter, which only highlights the dismal situation of lack of coverage for the Sundarbans in newspaper and film industry of both these countries.

4. Why and How the Media Needs to Participate

4.1. Survival

This research paper is based on two major cities (Kolkata and Dhaka) in the two neighbouring countries (India and Bangladesh). After developing a good understanding of the environmental challenges being faced by the Sundarbans, it has been found that these two cities and the entire nation of Bangladesh are directly dependent on the various ecosystem services of the Sundarbans mangrove ecosystem. In the issue of "The Sinking Sundarbans: But How Will the Government Correct Its Own Folly?" of 'Mainstream Weekly', the Journal which was fighting for freedom of the press during the 21-month long Emergency period of India, Sanhita Mukherjee writes that the destruction of the Sundarbans will raise questions about the existence of Kolkata, where the capital of West Bengal has already begun to douse (Mainstream Weekly, 2016). During the International Conference on Environment Day in 2017, Sheikh Hasina acknowledged that the Sundarbans is not only the heritage of Bangladesh, it is also an important reason that keeps the country of Bangladesh alive. This fact has also been recognized many times in various research papers, discussions, feature compositions, magazines of different organizations, etc. In such a situation, the inhabitants of Kolkata and Bangladesh need to awaken to save themselves, and powerful tools like newspapers and films need to become the principal weapon.

4.2. Social Responsibility

According to the Commission of Freedom of the Press (1947), one of the main function of the media is social responsibility. Media have to accept and fulfill certain

obligations to society by setting high or professional standards of truth, accuracy, objectivity and balance. A functional media is critical for a functional democracy. It should therefore be the principal duty of the mass media to slow down the long-term social disorder like, environmental unawareness, and to inspire people to protect nature.

4.3. By Using Well-Known Persons

According to the theory of Two Step Flow of Mass Communication, Paul Lazarsfeld points out that most people are not directly influenced by mass media, but rather form their opinions based on opinion leaders who interpret media messages and put them into context. Opinion leaders are those who are initially exposed to a specific media content, and who interpret it based on their own opinion. This person can be an entertainment or movie personality, athlete, artist or any other well-known person. For example, in the *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* campaign in India, the Central Government has used various influential and well-known personalities in social advertising for motivating rural and urban India for a healthy life. With the help of this method, the media of both countries can take an effective role in increasing public awareness about the environmental challenges faced by the Sundarbans.

4.4. Alternative Journalism

In an attempt to raise awareness and protect the Sundarbans, newspapers publishing regular columns or essays can go a long way. Citizens can also write letters to the editors which should be written by readers with some news value. Such attempts will help more people to become aware and come together for understanding and solving the environmental challenges of the Sundarbans. As a result, readers may become aware regarding Sundarbans by taking on the role of journalists. Here, the role of photojournalism also needs to be highlighted because regardless of education or literacy, a picture is indeed worth a thousand words. In the case of films, mass media can be influenced much more on the issue of Sundarbans, especially if the portrayal of this issue is done in a systematic manner. Issues and challenges of the residents of Sundarbans and the action (or lack of action) in this direction needs to form part of film narratives.

5. Conclusion

The main objective of this study is to analyze the role of media for protecting Sundarbans in India and Bangladesh. Global warming and environmental changes are destroying the existence of mangroves in Sundarbans, which has become a big challenge for the entire world. Thus, mass media tools need to be involved and activated

in these two developing countries. Media houses from other nations also need to play a similar role. This needs to occur before the destruction of the Sundarbans take an irreversible turn. And finally, even if mass media immediately begins to play an active role in this matter, it may still be difficult to obtain the results immediately. This is because when a new idea enters into a nation through the mass media, its benefits may take many years to be realized by the society.

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