



**NMML
OCCASIONAL PAPER**

**PERSPECTIVES
IN INDIAN DEVELOPMENT**

New Series

6

**Fishermen, the 'Forest Acts' and
narratives of eviction from Jambudwip island**

Niranjan Jaladas



**Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
2013**



© Niranjana Jaladas, 2013

All rights reserved. No portion of the contents may be reproduced in any form without the written permission of the author. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect the opinion of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library Society, in whole or part thereof.

Published by

Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
Teen Murti House
New Delhi-110011

e-mail : ddnehrumemorial@gmail.com

ISBN : 81-87614-51-X

Price Rs. 100/-; US \$ 10

Page setting & Printed by : A.D. Print Studio, 1749 B/6, Govind Puri
Extn. Kalkaji, New Delhi - 110019. E-mail : studio.adprint@gmail.com



Fishermen, the ‘Forest Acts’ and narratives of eviction from Jambudwip island*

Niranjan Jaladas

Abstract:

All through the second half of the twentieth century, fishermen, mainly refugees from East Bengal, came to work in Jambudwip – the south-western most forested island of Sundarbans – to temporarily use the island to dry their catch. In 2002, several hundred fishermen (both transient and permanently settled) were brutally evicted by the authorities for violating the Forest Acts. This paper deals with the pitiable condition of the fishermen community who were evicted from Jambudwip to fulfil the preconceived idea of ‘ecological sustainability’ of the administrators. The paper will look at the immediate impact the Forest Acts have had on the life and polity of the fishing/migrant community that used to make a transient living from working in Jambudwip. How the movement led by the Jambudwip fishermen emerged also as refugee movement will be discussed.

Keywords: ‘ecological sustainability’, East-Pakistani refugee, fisher-folk, Jalia Kaibarta, transient, trawler, *shabar*.

Following the partition of British India in 1947 into two sovereign states of India and Pakistan, all through the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, large numbers of Bengali Hindus entered West Bengal from what had become East Pakistan and subsequently Bangladesh. Most of the refugees from East Bengal came to the following three regions of West Bengal: the 24 Parganas, Nadia and Calcutta and its environs. Most of the refugees of the 1950s

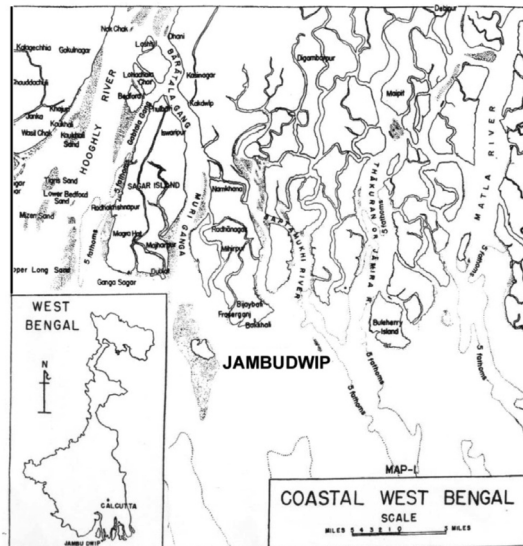
* Paper presented at the workshop titled ‘Forests, sociality, borderlands: Revisiting issues in Deltaic Bengal’, held at Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, 6-7 July, 2012.



were rehabilitated in the states of Bihar, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra. Even though they were sent to various inhospitable camps where the land was poor, those who had traditionally been fishermen kept coming to the different islands of Sundarbans to follow their traditional occupation of fishing. In this connection, they came to Jambudwip island (20-sq km island), located about 10 km offshore in the south-west corner of the Sundarbans at the mouth of river Hooghly in the Bay of Bengal. The island can be reached in 45 minutes from the Frasersgunj fishing harbour by *bhut bhuti*, a small powered country craft. Jambudwip is the south-western most forested island of Sundarbans. There, they took seasonal and temporary shelter and caught and dried their fish. In 2002, several hundred fishermen (both transient as well as those who had, over the years, been permanently settled) were brutally evicted by the authorities for violating the Forest Acts.

A Personal History

In this paper, I will discuss the fishermen’s experience and narrative of their eviction. It might be interesting for the reader to know that I belong to the same community as these migrant



Bikash Raychaudhuri, *The Moon and the Net: Study of a Transient Community of Fishermen at Jambudwip*, Calcutta, 1980, Reprinted, 2003.

fishermen and have grown up in this remote coastal region (which is 30-40 metres away from the Ganga-Baratala-Muriganga river and directly connected to the open sea— the Bay of Bengal) and have first hand experience of fishing: the activities linked to it, the modes of production, the experiences of fishermen, etc. I believe that this gives me a unique perspective and greater access to the issues at hand. I have allied this first hand personal knowledge and interaction with my community with an anthropological study based on nearly three years' fieldwork amongst my own community, and in this paper, I will narrate the pitiable conditions of the fishing-folk who were evicted from Jambudwip because their livelihood was perceived to be an 'obstacle' to the conservation of the Sundarbans and the ecological sustainability of the region. My main question will be: what was the immediate impact of the Forest Act on the life and polity of the migrated fishing community that used to make a transient living from working in Jambudwip.¹ I have narrated the whole sequence of events through my personal prism.

Through a discussion of the repercussion of the Forest Act on my community, I will try to show how the government's primacy on ecology and the use of force in Jambudwip caused not just eviction but the starving of hundreds of fisher-folk families. This was seen by the Sundarbans islanders of Jambudwip, just as Jalais had argued in relation to the Morichjhanpi massacre, as a betrayal not only of fishermen and of the poor and marginalized in general, but also of the Bengali refugee identity.² In fact, the Jambudwip eviction was considered a betrayal not just by the Sundarbans fisher-folk but also by the fisher-folk not residing in the Sundarbans. They stressed that it was because they were considered as lesser mortals situated at the periphery and marginalized due to their social inferiority as 'refugees' by the authorities that they had to face their plight. My attempt is to analyze how the Jambudwip fisher-folk movement is also a refugee movement. To clarify the situation for the reader, I try to link the historical perspective with the contemporary situation in the clearest possible way. I hope this effort will suggest some ideas for conflict resolution in this place and that this will be based along lines of a greater sustainability both for the region as well as for the fisher-folk of Jambudwip.

A Brief History of Refugees and their Ecological Set Up

The first wave of Hindu refugees to cross over into West Bengal, for the overwhelming majority, were drawn from ranks of the very well-to-do and the educated upper and middle classes; they had assets and skills which they could take with them across the border, and in many cases, well-connected kith and kin on the other side.³ But most of those who came later, over 4 millions in all from eastern Bengal, belonged to social groups of a much 'lower' status, the 'depressed', or Scheduled Caste. The Namasudras, Pods and Jalia Kaibartas earned their modest crust chiefly as peasants, labourers and fishermen.⁴ In fact, being victims of terrifying communal furies in the rural tracts of Khulna, Jessore, Barisal and Faridpur, poor peasants tended to migrate from East Bengal to India. The lower castes were people from Chittagong, Noakhali, Barisal, Faridpur, Jessore, Khulna and they were rehabilitated in different parts of West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Assam, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Andaman Nicobar Islands and in other Indian states.

As a matter of fact, long before the partition, the British also brought immigrants from Khulna (during 1930s, 1940s) and this was to reclaim the forests. In this way, the Namasudras, Pods and Jalia Kaibartas became participants of reclamation of the Sundarbans jungle long before the partition. Thus the ecology of the Sundarbans was known to be composed of people migrated from Chittagong, Noakhali, Khulna, Jessore, Barisal, and Faridpur and this ecology was more or less similar with the ecology of their natal region of islands of East Pakistan like Sandwip, Kutubdia, Banskali, Maheshkhali of Chittagong; Hatia, Lakshi, Batar Char of Noakhali, Dak Bangla, Sonar Char, Budir Char, Monpura, Dhal Char of Barisal districts. These people used to live along the different coastal rivers like Padma, Meghna, Jamuna, Karnapuli, Shankh, Fenni, Obdakhali, Ichamati, Kacha, Rangabali, Adial etc. of East Pakistan and were basically a fishing population.

It is to be mentioned here that when they came to India they were, no doubt, handicapped for some time and had to take a number of non-caste occupations like agriculture, rickshaw pulling, hotel service, bidi making, weaving, well digging, etc. Those were stop-gap arrangements for their bare subsistence. But they were always on the lookout for an opportunity to start their traditional occupation of fishing.⁵ As there were fishing spaces in Jambudwip where they could establish fishing camps, and natural creek for safely harbouring the boats and above all fish-rich estuaries in Sundarbans, they at last gathered in the western part of Sundarbans: Kakdwip, Namkhana, Bakkhali, Frasergunj and at last Jambudwip.⁶

Marine Fishing and *Shabar*

Fishing in the open sea and drying the catch on a large scale grew largely after the partition.⁷ As a matter of fact, prior to the 1950s; marine fishing could not flourish much in West Bengal except in the coastal parts of Midnapore. In contrast, the fisher-folk of Chittagong and Noakhali, due to the favourable ecological set-up of marine fishing there, had developed the art of marine fishing in their natal districts. So when the East Bengali refugees settled in different parts of West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa under adverse ecological conditions they dreamt of returning to their caste occupation of fishing.⁸ Migrated and rehabilitated East Bengali fisher-folk developed the economy of the Sundarbans to a large extent. In the case of the western part of Sundarbans, some of those were Kumud Hari Das, Petan Das, Rakhal Das, Bishnupada Das, Lalu Das and others. By and large they collected the necessary fishing articles and started the *shabar* business.⁹

Under more or less the same ecological situation the *shabar* culture was also present in Marakaran, Vikaranyam, Mangreni, Krishna-Godabari regions of Orissa and in Midnapore, Digha, Ramnagar, Contai, Khejuri and other places in West Bengal.¹⁰ In the same way, the migrant fisher-folk started the *shabar* business in Kakdwip, Namkhana, Sagar Island, Frasergunj, Bakkhali and in other coastal areas of the Sundarbans. We have to keep in mind

that during the 1950s, fisher-folk of Midnapore, Andhra Pradesh and East Bengal started to establish their fishing camps in the coastal areas of Sundarbans, Kakdwip, Namkhana, Frasergunj, Bakkhali, Shikarpur, Sagar Island, etc. Around 1954, conflict arose between fishing camps of those fishermen who belonged to West Bengal proper and those that belonged to East-Pakistan, especially over the selection of the site for setting the net.¹¹ As a matter of fact, the partition of Bengal seems to have been a serious challenge to the traditional fisher-folk of either sides of Bengal.¹²

The refugee fisher-folk of East Bengal, coming from the coastal districts of Chittagong and Noakhali, came to Jambudwip with a special aptitude for sea fishing, and they felt quite at home when they located a suitable fishing ground around the coastal sea. According to the unique and revered anthropologist Bikash Raychaudhuri, 'their adventurous spirit and superiority in skill over the local West Bengal fishermen led them to the discovery of new fields of operation and helped them in superseding the marine fisher-folk of West Bengal proper'.¹³ The *bahardars*¹⁴ and their respective crew members used to come to Jambudwip from Matihar, Jogapali of Bihar; Hanskhali, Kalyani, Nakshipara, Bangaon, Bijpur, Falta, Kakdwip, Ketugram, Balagar, Bansberia, Chinsurah, Mogra, Sankrail of West Bengal and Tungi of Orissa. Later on, most of these fisher-folk started to settle down in and around the western parts of Sundarbans, in places like Kakdwip, Namkhana, Frasergunj, Bakkhali. In this way, dry fish trade received a new impetus in West Bengal after the partition. Prior to the coming of the East Bengal fishermen, the local fisher-folk like the Rajbanshi, the Dhibar and the Bagdi, used to do marine fishing on a small scale.¹⁵ During the 1960s, when the *bahardars* of the above-stated places started their *shabar* business, they brought and recruited their necessary fishing labour not only from Bihar, Orissa, West Bengal but also directly from their natal districts i.e. Chittagong, Noakhali, Barisal of East Pakistan.

Production and Trade

In the economy of fishing trade there was a chain organization. The fisher-folk, the primary producers in this chain, i.e. the fishermen themselves, gained only just above subsistence level in the bargain. The major amount of the dry fish was sent to Calcutta from where it was sent to different parts of India like Orissa, Madras, Bombay, Assam and even to places outside India such as Nepal and Bhutan.¹⁶ With the passage of time, the traditional dry fishing industry was engulfed with the introduction of the trawler system. Prior to the introduction of the trawler, the fishermen of Jambudwip used country boats. During this period the decision making was restricted to the primary producers only. But later on, with the introduction of trawler and techno-economic pursuits, the decision making was largely controlled by the higher classes of the fishing community.

Following the indigenous style, the traditional dry fishing operation continued for a long period. To minimize their travel expenditure, some of the *bahardars* started leaving their luggage in Jambudwip itself. These were looked after by a few of the permanently settled crewmen of the *bahardars*. In fact, these simple crewmen fisher-folk always used to live near the sea-coast.¹⁷

There were two types of workers who were appointed in the *shabar* industry. One type worked on the shore and the other worked in the open sea. So, *shabar* business was a major employment-centre for those who were mostly illiterate and unskilled. (Pramanik, S. K. and Nandi, N. C., *Status and Potentials of Women Dry Fishworkers of Sundarban Coast, 2005 & Participation of Child Labour in Dry Fish Centres of Sundarban Coast, 2006-2007*). A large number of children and women of Sundarbans were appointed as contract labourers and hired labourers on daily wage basis (*hazira* workers-based on no works no pay). Children irrespective of sex, were engaged in various kinds of work in the fishing camps i.e. sorting, drying, carrying, bagging, storing, net mending etc. It needs to be

mentioned that there were six dry fishing centres in Sundarbans coast at Jambudwip, Kalisthan, Bakkhali, Frasergunj, Sagar and Mousuni. Unquestionably, Jambudwip was the largest fishing centre along with largest employment (Table no: 1) and Kalisthan was the second.

Table no: 1*

FISHING SESSION	FISHING GROUND	NO OF UNITS	TOTAL MEMBERS	AVERAGE SIZE
1967-1968	Jambudwip	17	243	14.29
1994-1995	Jambudwip	30	3761	125.37
1967-1968	Bakkhali	17	550(approx.)	32.4
1994-1995	Bakkhali	39	930	23.85
1967-1968	Frasergunj	13	170(approx.)	13.8
1994-1995	Frasergunj	35	1340	38.29
1967-1968	Sagar	**	**	**
1994-1995	Sagar	109	3305	30.32
1967-1968	Mousuni	**	**	**
1994-1995	Mousuni	159	1571	9.88
1967-1968	Kalisthan	**	**	**
1994-1995	Kalisthan	22	2175	98.86

* Sources: Bikash Raychaudhuri, *The Moon and the Net*, p. 20, Pramanik, S K and Nandi, N C, *Status and Potentials of Women Dry Fishworkers of Sundarban Coast*, 2005 & *Participation of Child Labour*, 2006-2007.

** During this period (1967-1968) dry fishing was not set up in these places then.

Each unit used to catch about 400 tonnes of fish in a single season. Two-thirds of the catch comprised species like Bombay duck, Ribbonfish, Anchovies, silver belly and wolf herring that were dried for human consumption and poultry feed. The rest one-third comprised high-value species like shrimp, jewfish, catfish, Indian salmon, eels, and rays, which were sold fresh. It was estimated that each unit used to catch fish worth Rs. 4 million (approx. US\$80,000) in a good season. Putting all the units

together, Jambudwip had a titanic production of about 16,000 tonnes of fish worth Rs. 168 million (approx. US\$3.4 million) in a five-month long fishing season (Mathew, Sebastian, 'Traditional fisheries, jammed in Jambudwip', *Samudra*, March, 2003).

Reasons for Eviction

Around the beginning of 1999, after a close aerial survey by the forest department of West Bengal, an order was issued to evacuate Jambudwip and its adjacent Kalisthan island on the grounds that the fisher-folk were damaging the valuable forests of the region. As a matter of fact, it was on 29th May 1943 that, under a notification of the Government of West Bengal, Jambudwip became a reserved forest as part of the protected forests in the Namkhana Division. As a result, no activity was allowed on the island, except those permitted by the Forest Department. Since 1989, Jambudwip has been part of the Buffer Zone of the Sundarbans Biosphere Reserve. However, it is located outside the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve.¹⁸

On the contrary, the fisher-folk are of the opinion that this move was completely politically motivated. They argued that the *bahardars* used to fulfil the demands of the different political leaders and certain Government officials. Later on, when the fisher-folk were unable to fulfil the growing demands of the officials, the latter wanted to evacuate the fisher-folk from Jambudwip island. The other reason given by the fisher-folk is because the Government was keen to establish a so-called 'eco-tourism project' which had nothing 'ecological' about it. Those supporting the fisher-folk cite an agreement between the state and the industrial group Sahara Paribar and the groups' bid to launch an eco-tourism project in Sundarbans. This, they fear, would not benefit the local people at all.¹⁹ We find from Annu Jalais's pen – 'To make way for a Rs. 540 crore tourism project of the Sahara Indian Group'. The plan was to build a 'world class city centre spread over 250 sq km of water surface', and to include a business centre, a cinema theatre, a cultural centre, club houses, health clubs, a helipad, etc. Advertising 'virgin islands' and



beaches of ‘pristine glory’, this ‘dream’ tourist destination guaranteed a service of ‘global standing’ on floating boat houses where one was assured of finding all at the same time a casino, scuba diving facilities, and a tiger breeding centre.²⁰ As a matter of fact, it guaranteed to be ‘a modern tourism blockbuster’.²¹

The Struggle/ Movement

However, under these circumstances, the fisher-folk organized a mass movement to protect their sole right, tooth and nail. The administration labelled the fisher-folk as ‘infiltrators’ to support their own wishes. But the fisher-folk vehemently opposed the term ‘infiltrators’. In their opinion, as they migrated from East Pakistan and were living in India for a pretty long time, they were never ‘infiltrators’. They took this term as a personal affront. Fisher-folk organizations of the Sundarbans viz, the ‘Bengal Fishermen and Fish-workers Union’, the ‘Sundarbans Matsyajibi Adhikar Raksha Mancha’, etc. were in full support of this Jambudwip movement. In support of this stand, we find various documentary evidences which came out in different newspapers of national importance. The fisher-folk pointed out some arguments that the Government had direct involvement in various periods with their life activities and knew all about them and could have stopped them earlier if they found that they had had a detrimental impact on the bio-diversity of the region. They claimed that without any alternate arrangements they could not be evicted. With their claim, the fisher-folk of Sundarbans presented a mass deputation to the SDO of Kakdwip.²² National ‘Fish-Workers Forum’ and ‘World Forum for Fisher People’ also supported this Jambudwip movement.

In their defence, the fisher-folk expressed that a large number of people are getting employment via the *shabar* business thereby providing to the state as well as the national exchequer. Secondly, they were much in favour of forestation, but did not think that that would have to be at the cost of the fisher-folk. Thirdly, they claimed that they had been fishing and drying fish for 52 years at Jambudwip island and that they had receipts proving that they

had paid tax to the forest office since 1978 and were in no way 'infiltrators'.²³ Fourthly, there are 15 fishing families staying in the island who have bonafide ration cards and whose names are on the voters' lists. Besides, government officials had even given tube-wells to the fisher-people in the island. Fifthly, they claimed that central acts cannot be contradictory to each other – that the Coastal Zone Regulations Notifications of 1991 under Indians Environment Protection Act of 1986 allowed 'traditional' and 'customary' rights to the traditional fisher-people wherever they are in India and especially when they are not involved in any destruction of mangroves.

The Eviction

On 21st April 1999, in the presence of the coordinator of World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish workers (W.F.F.F), Thomas Kochery, President of National Fish Workers' Forum (N.F.W.F), Harekrishna Debnath, environmentalist Amolesh Choudhury and the Secretary of Bengal Fishermen and Fish-workers Union, Narayan Das and Bijoy Sarkar of the Committee for Preservation of Environment, there was a huge gathering of about 5000 fisher-folk of the Sundarbans at Kakdwip. In the said meeting, it was resolved that they will take the responsibility of conserving mangroves if their demands were met. However, during this period, the life and the polity of the fisher-folk family was greatly affected because of the closing of the '*shabar*' business at Jambudwip island. Some of the evicted families who permanently settled at Jambudwip were compensated by the administration but most were not. Due to the cessation of any activity in and on Jambudwip, the impact on *baharders* and the crewmen made life pitiable. For instance, the trawlers couldn't get any entry in the creeks resulting in the death by starvation of some of the fisher-folk. When the Central Empowered Committee (CEC) of the Supreme Court visited Jambudwip, they tried to scrutinize the records of the Forest Department of Namkhana. Unfortunately, records in this connection – proving that the fishermen had worked on Jambudwip since the 1950s – could not be traced. But there were two important permits issued by the Forest Department

to Nitai Chandra Das and Kalachand Das dated nearly forty years ago on 26th January, 1978²⁴ and 29th January, 1980²⁵ respectively. However, the CEC endorses the Forest Department's view that Jambudwip was an 'uninhabited' island since 1943 and 'there are no recorded rights of any person or fisher-folk in the area'. The fisher-folk on the other hand, have receipts of boat taxes and permits for seasonal fishing, dating as far back as 1978—well before the 'Forest Conservation Act' of 1980 came into force. To reinforce my point even more, I can highlight the indisputable evidence of the activity in the study which was taken up by Bikash Raychaudhury from the Anthropological Survey of India. He lived on the island through the entire fishing season of 1967-68. His book *The Moon and the Net: Study of a Transient Community of Fishermen at Jambudwip* was published in 1980. He told me that the said permits were issued in 1967 as well.²⁶

In 2002, due to the irregularity of the *shabar* business at Jambudwip, the *bahardars* refused to pay the advance *dadān* (advance money lending system) to their respective crew members (fishing labour). As a result, a large number of the fisher-folk of Kakdwip, Namkhana, Frasergunj, Sagar Island, Gosaba, Basanti, Kalyani Simanta, Basudebpur, Baikuntapur, etc. had to face starvation. To face such a pitiable situation, most of the fisher-folk had to dispose of their belongings. The leader of the Jambudwip movement and other social workers like Bijoy Sarkar, Nirmal Das formed accumulated funds. They backed the fisher-folk of the Sundarbans by providing rice, books, money and other necessary material. Akshoynagar Shromojibi Mahila Samiti and other social organizations stretched a helping hand by participating in these programmes. With the participation of a large number of fisher-folk in and around Sundarbans, the Jambudwip movement got a definite shape and spontaneity. The administration had to retreat due to the mass protest. In spite of the directive from the concerned authority, the *shabar* business continued for two more years. That was the primary success of the movement led by the fisher-folk of the Sundarbans.

Later, on 3rd May, 2002, the central and state forest department

issued a deadline for the evacuation of Jambudwip to avoid any dire eventualities within four months.²⁷ The West Bengal forest authorities, however, hardened their stand on Jambudwip. They erected concrete pillars at the mouth of the creek, the lifeblood of the fishermen and their fisheries — allegedly to block the entry of fishing vessels into the creek. On 12th November, 2002, for the first time in the history of Jambudwip, ten fishermen drowned at sea during a cyclone, as they were unable to seek shelter in the creek. The CEC visited Jambudwip on 3rd December, 2002, in response to an application from the Executive Director, Wildlife Protection Society of India, seeking suitable relief against alleged encroachment and destruction of mangroves by fishermen. The Central Empowered Committee (CEC), said that the seasonal “occupation” of the Jambudwip island by fishermen and the fish-drying activity was a non-forest activity that cannot be permitted under the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980, without prior approval of the central government. The CEC’s report of 24th December 2002, directed the West Bengal government to remove all traces of encroachment on Jambudwip island by 31st March, 2003.²⁸ Following the verdict of the Supreme Court, the state forest department posted police force at Jambudwip so that no ‘infiltrators’ could enter there and thereby Jambudwip was declared as restricted zone. Thousands of fisher-folk were also evicted from Jambudwip who were fishing and drying the catch then.

Relocation

How did the administration want to relocate the fisher-folk? The forest department had proposed an alternative site for them at Haribanga island. But for the fisher-folk, moving to Haribanga would be a case of ‘out of the frying pan into the fire’. The area of the Haribanga island in comparison to Jambudwip is about 1/10th of its space. Moreover, the Haribanga island is devoid of any forest and full of low quality sand. The dry fish in that island is mostly (90%) used as poultry food or fish meal. Above all, there are no mangroves in Haribanga island. Under these circumstances, in case any natural calamity occurred, it would be devastating

for the fisher-folk and their potential settlements. Opposing the state forest department's views, the then state fisheries supported the need of the fisher-folk of Sundarbans.²⁹ While the Fisheries Department of West Bengal under Minister Kiranmoy Nanda strongly defended the fishermen's claim to the seasonal use of the island, the Forest Department bitterly opposed³⁰. It was decided that about 100 hectares of land, where the fishermen dry the catches, would be given to the State Fisheries Department, which in turn would give 100 hectares of land in Haribanga island to the State Forest Department³¹. Different national papers severely criticized the role of the administration in respect to the decisions made about Jambudwip³².

According to the verdict of the Supreme Court, the fisher-folk are not allowed to use any mechanized boat when approaching the Jambudwip island. The fisher-folk had the option then to utilize the loophole of the verdict (mechanized boat). During the turmoil period, the fisher-folk of the Sundarbans fervently appealed to the authorities to allow them a portion of the island to dry their catch. But on the contrary, the authorities denied their appeal and suggested that they were permitted to catch the fish from the adjacent areas of Jambudwip, but in no case could they approach the island to dry their catch there. It appeared to me a silly proposition like the classical piece of Shakespeare's Shylock, the Jew, where he was allowed 'a pound of flesh but not a drop of blood'. The forest authorities are of the opinion that the fisher-folk utilize a large number of mangroves in order to construct their *khuntis* (fishing camp) and other accessories each year. But unfortunately, such notions are not based on facts. The fisher-folk of this area used to collect their necessary raw material from Kakdwip and adjacent areas³³.

Sources of Raw Material

1.	Thread	Barrackpur and Baruipur (24-Parganas), Barrabazar (Calcutta), Chandannagar and Sheoraphuli (Hooghly), Uluberia (Howrah)
2.	Bamboo	Achipur and Kanchrapara (24-Parganas), Pearapur (Hooghly), Pujali, Saranga and Sibdaspur (Howrah)
3.	Other Bamboo	Halisahar, Hanskhali, Haringhata and Kakdwip (24-Parganas), Serampur (Hooghly), and Uluberia (Howrah)
4.	Wooden Post	Kakdwip (24-Parganas), Pujali and Uluberia(Howrah)
5.	Net	Akshaynagar, Ganeshpur Kakdwip and Kalinagar (24-Parganas)
6.	Garan Chhal (Net Preservative)	Beleghata (Calcutta) and Kakdwip (24-Parganas)
7.	Wire Rope	Kidderpur (Calcutta)
8.	Coconut Fibre Rope	Barrabazar (Calcutta), Kakdwip (24-Parganas)
9.	Jute	Tribeni (Hooghly)
10.	Fish Basket & Hogla	Kakdwip (24-Parganas) and Uluberia (Howra)
11.	Food Stuff	Diamond Harbour, Frasergunj and Kakdwip (24-Parganas)

Source: Bikash Raychaudhuri, *The Moon and the Net: Study of a Transient Community of Fishermen at Jambudwip*, p.150

Actually, more recently, the fisher-folk used to collect their necessary dry narrow branches as building material and fuel from the small bushes in the mangroves. But, there is no debating that the fisher-folk are aware of the beneficial coverage the forest provides them – both for their own fishing interests as well as their safety against the various natural calamities such as storms and cyclones and tidal waves. We find that plantations of certain

plants (*Phoenix paludosa* Roxburgh, *Tamarix gallica* Lin etc.) were practised by the transient fisher-folk at Jambudwip³⁴. According to Dr. L. K. Banerjee, (Retired Joint Director, Botanical Survey of India) — Jambudwip has successive stages of vegetation, comprising mainly *Avicennia* species of mangroves, and species of grass like *Porteraesia coarctata* and *Phoenix paludosa*. The species diversity on the island is not that significant. However, the satellite imageries of Jambudwip for the period 1981 to 2001, the National Remote Sensing Agency (NRSA) furnished to the CEC by the Forest Department as “irrefutable proof” of mangrove destruction show dense mangrove vegetation coverage except in areas that are allegedly cleared by the fishermen. Moreover, since higher-resolution satellite images are clearly showing deforestation to the detail that the NRSA images are claiming to portray have been produced in India only from 1998, the authenticity of the images as irrefutable proof for the period prior to 1998 needs to be independently verified scientifically³⁵. Moreover, one needs to mention that according to the policy and guidelines on eco-tourism formulated by the Ministry of Tourism, Government Of India, and the subsequent eco-tourism policies of 2003, any move in relation to the forest should be undertaken only with the positive involvement of the local communities, especially when these do not have any serious impact on the eco-system and have a lifestyle which is sustainable, as it has so little development infrastructure.³⁶

While the authorities wanted to evict the fisher-folk from Kalisthan island like Jambudwip, the fisher-folk with their women counterpart, vehemently resisted the authorities. Later with the intervention of Hrishikesh Maity, the MLA of Kakdwip, the authorities had to retreat and permitted fishermen to carry on their *shabar* business.

Second Phase of the Movement

In the second phase of the Jambudwip movement, Harekrishna Debnath, Tejen Das, Sishuranjan Das and other eminent personalities of the Sundarbans played an important role. In this

stage, the legal confrontation between the authorities and the fisher-folk association was dominant. As a matter of fact, under the leadership of Tejen Das, the secretary of the 'Kakdwip Fishermen Association', Jambudwip movement spread to a pan-India level. It needs to be mentioned that in the first phase of the movement, the leaders incorporated many of their civil rights. For instance, voting right, etc.³⁷

Consequences of Eviction / Conclusion

There were two basic differences between the first and second phases of the Jambudwip movement. In the first phase, the importance was given to the primary producers (fishing labour) and in the second, to the *baharders*. Furthermore, in the first phase, we find a conflict between the various class structures within the fishing community. It appeared that the leaders of second phase of the Jambudwip movement avoided the leaders of the first. There was tussle between the interest of the *baharders* and the fishing labour in the case of the *shabar* business of Jambudwip. Through interviews it was revealed that the crew members, or the 'fishing labour', had to take prior permission to leave the isolated island when visiting their natal villages. But as Kalisthan island and other places are adjacent to the mainland, the crew members could frequently visit their natal villages resulting in the loss of the *baharders*' economy. In a word, there was a good difference in the interests of the *baharders* versus that of the fishing crew members.

When they were evicted from Jambudwip, most of the *baharders* with their large-size fishing camps settled mainly in Frasergunj (12), Kalisthan (7), Sagar (7), Bakkhali (2)³⁸. They settled in Hatipitia (Sagar island), Lalgunj (Namkhana) and in other places. The *baharders* had to expense Rs. 5,00,000 for each large-size *shabar* due to inconvenience suffered by them by shifting the sites of their fishing camps. Due to paucity of land for making the *khunti* there was regular confrontation among the *baharders*. A large number of *baharders* like Paban Das, Sishuranjan Das and others had to face severe economic crisis.

As a result, they had to dispose of their fishing gears like trawler, boat, net, etc. Under these circumstances, some of the *baharders* even failed to repay their loans. Thirdly, due to the extreme economic turmoil, various social problems, many criminal activities developed in and around Jambudwip. On the one hand, the *baharders* had to leave their traditional *shabar* business and with their minimum rest capital they started some superior quality business like cement business, godown of different vegetables, etc. Some of course adhered to related businesses such as that of net making, thread, float of the net and bamboos as necessary for fishing.

Some of the *baharders* shifted to fresh fishing trawler system³⁹ leaving the *shabar* business. When the primary producers or crew members lost their *shabar* occupations, they were forced to engage themselves in various non-caste occupations⁴⁰ like mason labour, rickshaw pulling etc. Some of the fisher-folk had to migrate to different states. Due to dire necessity, even minor children of the fisher-folk family left school and started working in different tea-stalls⁴¹. Many of the *baharders* and their fishing crew members were physically and mentally perturbed. However, through interviews, it appeared to me that the fisher-folk of the Sundarbans want their Jambudwip island till today. When I informed the fisher-folk regarding presentation of this paper I was questioned if there was any chance of the return of Jambudwip island.

This paper is dedicated to the affected fisher-folk families of West Bengal due to their evacuation from Jambudwip. I am deeply grateful to Dr. Bikash Raychaudhuri, Dr. Annu Jalais, Keepuram Jimmy, Dr. Amites Mukhopadhyay, Soboud Manna, Santosh Kumar Barman and Dr. Bijoy Sarkar. They helped and inspired me enormously. I wish to thank Gopal Das, Narayan Das and Anil Das for their cooperation during my field study.

NOTES

1. For details see Bikash Raychudhuri, *The Moon and the Net: Study of a Transient Community of Fishermen at Jambudwip*, Calcutta, 1980, Reprinted 2003.
2. Annu, Jalais, 'Dwelling On Morichjhanpi, When Tigers Became 'Citizens', Refugees 'Tiger-Food' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 23, 2005, pp. 1757-1762.
3. Joya Chatterji, *The spoils of partition, Bengal and India, 1947-1967*, 2011, p. 115. Of the 1.1 million Hindus who had migrated from the east by 1st June 1948, about 350,000 were urban bhadralok; another 550,000 belonged to the rural Hindu gentry (P.K. Chakraborti, *The Marginal Men*, p. 1). Many of the rest were businessmen. (K.B. Pakrasi, *The Uprooted: A Sociological study of the refugees of West Bengal*, India, Calcutta 1971).
4. Ibid, p. 108. See also Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, protest and identity in colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872-1947*, London, 1997, p.21; H.H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, Vol-1, p. 188, First Published, London, 1891, Reprinted, Calcutta, 1981.
5. Bikash Raychaudhuri, *The Moon and the Net: Study of a Transient community of Fishermen at Jambudwip*, Calcutta, 1980, Reprinted 2003) pp. 17-18, pp. 185-196.
6. Ibid. See also Sebastian Mathew, 'Traditional fisheries jammed in Jambudwip, The traditional stake-net fishers of the ecologically sensitive Jambudwip island face a likely ban of their seasonal fisheries', in *Samudra*, March, 2003. Jaladas, Niranjan Jaladas, *Ecology and Fishing based Economy of Kakdwip (1900-2000)*, in Bengali in my M. Phil dissertation submitted in 2011.
7. Bikash Raychaudhuri, 'Some Fishing Communities of West Bengal', *Man In India*, Vol-49, No. 3, July-September 1969, pp. 241-246. Comparative study on progress in fishing between pre-partition and post-partition period was briefly done by me. 'Ecology and Fishing based Economy of Kakdwip (1900-2000)' in Bengali in my M. Phil dissertation submitted in 2011. See also S.K Pramanik, *Fishermen community of coastal villages in West Bengal*, Rawat Publications, Jaipur, New Delhi, 1993; R.K. Barman, *Fisheries and Fishermen: A Socio-economic History of Fisheries and Fishermen of colonial Bengal and post-colonial West Bengal*, Abhijit Publication, Delhi, 2008; Gautam K Bera and Vijoy S. Sahay, (ed.), *In the Lagoons of Gangetic Delta*, Mittal Publication, New Delhi, 2010.

8. Bikash Raychaudhuri, 'Some Fishing Communities' op cit. p. 243.
9. Fishing camp, fishing ground, mode of fish production, fishing style, whole of the system of haul and dry fish production locally known as *shabar* business. With the passage of time of more than 50 years, there have been a lot of changes within the *shabar* system. At the outset, *shabar* business developed at minimum level. The fishermen of Jambudwip with their country boat hardly ventured to go beyond 15-16 nautical miles. They used to set their net within this range and haul their catch. But due to the falling of the catch and along with the advent of trawler their area of operation extended far beyond. Obviously the whole structure and organization brought radical change. For details see also Bikash Raychaudhuri, *The Moon and The net: Study of a Transient community of Fishermen at Jambudwip*, Calcutta, 1980, Reprinted 2003; S. K. Pramanik and N. C. Nandi, 'Status and Potentials of Women Dry Fishworkers of Sundarban Coast', *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, Vol. XLVII, No. 2, 2005, pp. 65-76; 'Participation of Child Labour in Dry Fish Centres of Sundarban Coast', *Socialist Perspective*, Vol. 34, No. 3-4, December 2006-March 2007, pp. 170-177; S. K. Pramanik, 'Women Dry Fishworkers in Sundarban—A Look Into Their Working Spirit And Levels of Involvement', *Man In India*, 76(2): 1996, pp. 115-126.
10. Data was prepared by Bikash Raychaudhuri.
11. Bikash Raychaudhuri, *The Moon and the Net*, op. cit. p. 8.
12. R.K. Barman, *Fisheries and Fishermen*, op. cit. p. 59.
13. Bikash Raychaudhuri, *The Moon and the Net*, op. cit pp. 17-18. Such instances are not rare. It is also found among the fishing communities of Chilka Lake of Orissa. The fishermen of Chilka do not venture to go to the open sea. On the other hand, the Telugu fishermen (Nulia) of Andhra Pradesh who migrated to the narrow strip of land dividing Bay of Bengal and Chilka Lake, ventured to go to the Bay of Bengal. See Bikash Raychaudhuri, *Journal of the Indian Anthropological society*, Vol. 12, No 2, July 1977, pp. 101-112.
14. Owner of fishing boat, net or leader of the whole fishing unit. With the passage of time, the meaning of *bahardars* has also evolved completely at present. In 1960, the *bahardars* were closely associated with the fishing labour. They even actively participated in fishing. They used to collect the necessary raw materials and borrowed money from *dadandars* as leaders of the whole fishing activities. There were few differences between *bahardars* and fishing labour and in their standard of living over all. But

now, we notice good distinction between *bahardars* and fishing labour due to the financial upliftment of the former at a high pace.

15. Bikash Raychaudhuri, *The Moon and the Net*, op. cit, p.137.
16. Bikash Raychaudhuri, *The Moon and the Net*, op. cit, p.161.
17. Sukla Dasgupta, *Jambudwip Bhraman, Tanubali*, Kolkata Boimel Sankhya, Shyamnagar, 24-Parganas (North), January, 2003.
18. Sebastian Mathew, 'Traditional fisheries', op. cit.
19. 'Out Of Bounds, Fisher-folk Effectively Banned From Entering Jambudwip Island' *Down to Earth*, February 28, 2003 Delhi, p.15.
20. Annu Jalais, *Forest of Tigers: People, Politics & Environment in the Sundarbans*, Routledge, New Delhi, 2010, p. 205.
21. Pankaj Sekhsaria, 'Sundarbans: Biosphere in Peril', *Outlook*, 13 June, 2004. I have quoted from Annu Jalais, *Forest Of Tigers*, p. 205.
22. *Sundarbans Matsyajibi Adhikar Raksha Mancha, Kakdwip, 24 Parganas (South), Sundarbans Samudrik Matsyajibi Shromik Union*, Ganeshpur, Bamuner Mode, 21st January, 1999.
23. Ibid.
24. This permit was issued from Bakkhali, Directorate of Forests, West Bengal, Sundarbans Division, Book No-A 4877, Permit No.76 dated on 26th January, 1978.
25. This permit was issued from Bakkhali Station, Frasingunj, Forest Department, West Bengal, 24 Parganas Division, Bakkhali Depot, Sundarbans Division, Book No-21/1027, Permit No. G14344 dated 26th January, 1978.
26. 'Out of Bounds, Fisher-folk Effectively Banned from Entering Jambudwip Island' in *Down to Earth*, February 28, 2003, Delhi, p.15.
27. Sebastian Mathew, 'Traditional fisheries', op. cit. The CEC denouncement followed a series of events consequent to the Supreme Court order of 12th December 1996 on the issue of forest encroachment. Further to its Order of 23rd November 2001, restraining the Central Government from regularizing all encroachments, the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) wrote to all States and Union Territories on 3rd May 2002 to regularize *only* eligible encroachments before 1980 and to evict all other encroachments by 30th September 2002.

28. Ibid. The CEC was constituted by the Supreme Court of India by a Notification on 20th June, 2002 to provide relief against any action taken by the Central/State Governments or any other authority regarding, *inter alia*, deforestation and encroachments, and the implementation of legal instruments for forest conservation.

29. 'Row Over Jambudwip Settled', in *The Statesman*, Friday, 6th June, 2003.

30. Sebastian Mathew, 'Traditional fisheries', op. cit.

31. Row over Jambudwip Settled', in *The Statesman*, Friday, 6th June, 2003.

32. *Down To Earth*, Delhi, February 28, 2003, Delhi, p.15. *Ananda Bazar Patrika* (10th June, 17th October, 19th October 2003), *Kalantar* (15th March, 1999, 16th March, 1999).

33. Bikash Raychaudhuri, *The Moon and the Net*, op. cit, p.150.

34. Sudam Krishna Mandal, *Astorag*, Lalmohan Karan, Sherpur, Kanthi, Medinipur, 25th December, 1998, p. 139.

35. He worked on the mangroves of Sundarbans for the past 30 years. I have quoted from Sebastian Mathew, *ibid*.

36. Ujjal Kumar Bhattacharyya, 'Eco-tourism in West Bengal Forests' in Sibdas Ghosh (ed.), *Eco-Tourism-Its Impact On Socio-economy, Heritage and Wild Life Conservation, Proceedings of the Humboldt College*, Held at Mirik, January 18-20, Humboldt Club Calcutta, 2005, p.11.

37. *Eikya, Chetona, Shanti o Agrogoti-i Bancha ebong Unnyaner Mool Niti, Protibaad o Protiroder madhyome Kakdwip ke Sorbonasher Haat Theke Raksha Karun*, Published by Biranga Das, Kakdwip, Feb. 1999.

38. S. K. Pramanik and N. C. Nandi, 'Status and Potentials of Women Dry Fishworkers of Sundarban Coast, *Journal of the Asiatic Society*', Vol. XLVII, No. 2, 2005, pp. 65-76.

39. In this type of fishing, generally the fisher-folk catch and refrigerate the fish for 10-12 days in the trawler and after coming back from the sea, sell in the market.

40. Bikash Raychaudhuri, 'Castes and Occupational Drift', *Journal of Indian Anthropological Society*, Vol. 15, No. 1, pp. 15-21, 1980.

41. For the crucial affect on fisher-folk see Documentary 'Under The Sun', Rita Banerjee (Directed), International Collective in Support of Fishworkers, India, 2003.

REFERENCES

1. D. N. Guha Bakshi, P. Sanyal and K. R. Naskar, (ed.), *Sundarbans Mangal*, Nayaprakash, Calcutta, 1999.
2. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, protest and identity in colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872-1947*, London, 1997.
3. R. K. Barman, *Fisheries and Fishermen: A Socio-economic History of Fisheries and Fishermen of colonial Bengal and post-colonial West Bengal*, Abhijit Publication, Delhi, 2008.
4. Gautam K. Bera, Vijoy S. Sahay, (ed.), *In the Lagoons of Gangetic Delta*, Mittal Publication, New Delhi, 2010.
5. Pradip Kumar Bose, *Refugees in West Bengal: Institutional Practices and Contested Identities*, Calcutta Research Group, 2000.
6. Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947*, Cambridge University Press, 1995.
7. Joya Chatterji, *The spoils of partition, Bengal and India, 1947-1967*, Cambridge University Press, 2011.
8. Rathindranath Dey, *The Sundarbans*, Oxford University Press, Calcutta, 1990.
9. Ghosh, Sibdas Ghosh (ed.), *Eco-Tourism-Its Impact On Socio-economy, Heritage and Wild Life Conservation, Proceedings of the Humboldt College*, Held at Mirik, January 18-20, Humboldt Club Calcutta, 2005.
10. Niranjana Jaladas, *Ecology and Fishing based Economy of Kakdwip (1900-2000)* in Bengali in my M. Phil dissertation submitted in 2011.
11. Annu Jalais, *Forest Of Tigers: People, Politics & Environment in the Sundarbans*, Routledge, New Delhi, 2010.
12. Sudam Krishna Mandal, *Astorag*, Lalmohan Karan, Sherpur, Kanthi, Medinipur, 25 Dec, 1998.
13. L. S. S. O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazeteers*, Bengal Secretariate Book Department, First Publication, Calcutta, 1940.
14. K.B. Pakrasi, *The Uprooted: A Sociological study of the refugees of West Bengal, India*, Calcutta, 1971.
15. Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, Reprinted 2008.



16. S.K. Pramanik, *Fishermen community of coastal villages in West Bengal*, Rawat Publications, Jaipur, New Delhi, 1993.
17. Bikash Raychaudhuri, *The Moon and the Net: Study of a Transient Community of Fishermen at Jambudwip*, Calcutta, 1980, Reprinted 2003.
18. H.H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, Vol-1, 188, First Published, London, 1891, Reprinted, Calcutta, 1981.
19. Pankaj Sekhsaria, 'Sundarbans: Biosphere in Peril', *Outlook*, 13 June, 2004.