

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

## ABSTRACT

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

**Study design:** This ~~was a paper is~~ qualitative study and empirical research. It focused ~~ds~~ on the impact of environmental movements ~~located going~~ around Ratargul ~~S~~swamp ~~F~~forest ~~to n~~ the forest and ~~surrounding the~~ local people.

**Place and Duration of Study:** This research was done ~~around the~~ Ratargul ~~S~~swamp ~~F~~forest ~~located in on the~~ ~~Goainghat upazilla under~~ Sylhet ~~D~~istrict ~~of Bangladesh. T and the~~ study period was ~~from~~ January 2016 to November 2017.

**Methodology:** For the primary data collection, ~~47 Forty seven~~ respondents were selected by using stratified random sampling on the basis of their level of involvement. Data ~~whas been~~ collected from ~~the~~ local people, ~~and~~ environmental groups and ~~from~~ the forest department. Main data collection methods were ~~via k~~Key informant interview, semi-structured interviews, case study, focus group discussion and archival research.

**Results:** ~~It is revealed that as a result of different movement, p~~People of Ratargul village are now more aware about the harmful activities of uncontrolled tourism, ~~while and~~ the ~~F~~forest ~~D~~epartment brings new management ~~policies and practices~~ in response to the local and civil pressure. It ~~wais~~ also ~~found viewed~~ that ~~the Climate Resilient Ecosystems and Livelihoods (CREL) project in Bangladesh the new management~~ actually works ~~as a means~~ to ~~negatedeactivating~~ the strength of ~~the environmental~~ movement rather ~~than~~ as a conservation ~~proponentstrategy~~. The Forest Department is successful due to a lack of ~~coordination between local activists.~~

**Conclusion:** ~~It is revealed that Forest Department is successful due to lack of integration and coordination between the activists. Thus a~~ strong, integrated, coordinated and organized form of resistance or movement is needed to ~~break upshatter~~ the hegemony of Forest Department that may save the Ratargul Swamp Forest from ongoing damage.

**Keywords:** Environmental movement, conservation, sustainable development.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Ratargul ~~S~~swamp ~~F~~forest of Sylhet ~~D~~istrict, Bangladesh, ~~is~~ one of the 22 fresh-water swamp forests in the world (Al-Hadi, 2016, July 18), ~~is a witness for environmental movement focused on its conservation. Before 2012, it was unknown to world's people and even the Forest Department of Bangladesh was also unaware about its special characteristics. After 27th September 2012, Anis Mahmud's picture published by the Daily Prothom Alo (reference this paper), significant numbers of tourists started to visit this forest to enjoy its natural beauty. This led to a number of issues coming 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 significant tree logging. Since the exposure of~~

~~Ratargul as a tourist spot, it has been experiencing uncontrolled and unregulated tourism activity. In addition, mismanagement by the of local forestry department also attracted the attention of civil society, calling. As a result, civil society organizations and local people call for the establishment of environmental movements to save this forest before being totally destroyed by these harmful activities. Indicate value/importance of forest to locals and tourism.~~

~~This paper is an effort to explore and analyze the scope and nature of environmental movement that may shape the existing management. It is transpired that, these movements are successful to increase the local people's awareness to conserv~~

Environmental activists and civil society ~~have noted~~ identify these problems and started to protest against the new expropriation of this forest. It was on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of October 2012, when a group of concerned ~~citizens~~ people ~~protested~~ advocating growing awareness between local people and ~~also forcing the~~ forest department to stop activities against the conservation of this forest. They ~~formed~~ and involved a number of environmental groups to raise awareness about the issues facing the forest ~~the voice loudly~~. As a response to these protests, government introduced a new management system to the Ratargul Swamp Forest that is CREL (Climate- Resilient Ecosystems and Livelihood) project, funded by USAID and implemented by Winrock International, as an initiative to conserve the forest environment (USAID, 2016). [Suggested citation: USAID. 2016. Bangladesh Climate-Resilient Ecosystem Curriculum (BACUM). USAID's Climate-Resilient Ecosystems and Livelihoods (CREL) Project. Winrock International. Dhaka, Bangladesh] But the environmentalists rejected ~~to accept~~ this management initiative, because of ~~the~~ previous experiences from co-management projects in other forested areas of Bangladesh, such as 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 and academics. The CREL authorities and CREL committee view this type of management strategy as a big success, whereas local people and activists perceive it as a government's neo-liberal strategy that aim to weaken the local environmental movement and to preserve the status quo. Nevertheless, Government of Bangladesh ~~implemented~~ CREL project in 2013. CREL started their activities with the full support and assistance ~~help~~ from the forest department. One of the objectives were to convince and try to make people ~~believe~~ that it will alter and minimize the entrance ~~penetration of on~~ Ratargul from the outsiders. Within ~~at the~~ few days after implementation of CREL inauguration the suspicion of locals were validated ~~people and activities become true, which will be clearer in the later parts of this writing.~~

~~e it from harmful did, and also the forest department to introduce a new step for the management (CREL project) of this forest. But interestingly, there are different opinions regarding the role of CREL in conserving the forest; CREL authorities and CREL committee identify this management as a huge success but local people and activists call it as a government's neo-liberal strategy that working to make the movement weaker and let the existing modes of management continue.~~

## 2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

### 2.1 Study area

— Ratargul is a freshwater swamp forest situated at Fotehpur union under Gwainghat upozilla in Sylhet District, Bangladesh. It situated at latitude 25°00.025'N and longitude 91°58.180'E. 29. Ratargul swamp forest is locally known as 'The Sundarbans of Sylhet'. The origin, development and existence of Ratargul swamp forest is totally water based. The source of this water is Chengerkhal, which is basically a lower part of Sari River sourced

from Myntdu, Lamu and Umsaking rivers from Khasi-Jaintia hill tracks (Partha, 2016; January 17). 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 amphibian (Choudhury et al., Biswas, Islam, Rahman & Uddin, 2004: 6-7) and 94 species of fishes among which 63 are survived and 28 species are threatened (Islam et al., Islam, Arefin, Rashid & Barman, 2016). Its position is between Moheshkher and Bogabari mouza. Chalitabari, Chainarpar, Jolurmukh villages are situated in its north and north-west; Aolarkut, Chanpur, Sahob bazaar are in south, and Ratargul, Alinagar villages are in south-east side. Changer khal, Shimul bil haor and Newa bil haor are also situated in its south.

## 2.2 Study population

There are 9 villages located around Ratargul Swamp Forest, which house 1321 families and with 8267 people. Total population who are somehow dependent to the forest. Among them the inhabitants of Ratargul village are 545, Jolurmukh Village 1220, Chalitabari village 1050, Alinagar village 209, Baghbari village 752, Dewanergaon village 490, Moheshkher village 1045, Shiala Village 1325, and Ramnagar village 720 are under Gowainghat village. Again the population of 7 no. ward under Sadar upozilla is Aolarkut village 1120. [Info on these villages of no value if not included in this study] However, inhabitants of Ratargul village were selected as the research population. [Indicate why this specific village was selected] [Indicate socio-economic status/condition of this village.]

*[This paragraph focusses on informants]* This study focuses on the native people involved in local environmental movements (indicate names of these activist movements) related to the Ratargul Swamp Forest, and the inhabitants of Ratargul are with this movement, this research takes the inhabitants of Ratargul village as research population. Because Ratargul swamp forest is situated in the map of Ratargul village only and they are related to the environmental movement of this area. Further key informants included It also includes environmentalists (n=?) of various organizations (i.e. Bangladesh Poribeshbadi Andolone (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)), government employees (n=?), and academicians (n=?) who are related to the movement and the forest. In total 47 respondents were selected for the primary data collection. They were selected by using stratified random sampling on the basis of their level of involvement.

## 2.3 Methods and tools of data collection:

*[This paragraph focusses on tools]* The study period was from January 2016 to November 2017. Forty seven respondents were selected for the primary data collection. They were selected by using stratified random sampling on the basis of their level of involvement. Data were has been collected via from the local people and environmental groups and from the forest department. Key informant interview, semi-structured interview, schedules, case study investigations [explain], focus group discussions [explain] and archival research [explain] are applied as the main data collection methods.

*[This paragraph focusses on themes explored with key interview groups]* To elucidate the environment in which present the situation of movement operate, aspects related to Organizations, Forms, Strategies and Process, feelings of the activists, and their expressions regarding protests activities and government decisions about the forest, were investigated, some pictures are present and interpret in this paper. Further key informants included environmentalists of various organizations [indicate the various themes explored with these key informants], government employees [indicate the various themes explored with these key informants], and academics [indicate the various themes explored with these key informants].

**2.4 ~~DMethods and tools of data analysis:~~** Data are analyzed by following 'Grounded-theory approach'. Data collected by interviews and case studies are analyzed by sorting them according to the theme and objectives of the study and presented by using MS word. Data collected by studying archives are presented as snapshots as an example of respondent's feelings, arrangement of protests activities during that time and interpret them. Some pictures during the movement period, related to the study, are also included and interpreted in various place. Socio-economic condition of the respondents are processed by using MS excel and SPSS [indicate version] ~~and presented by table and graph with explanations.~~

#### Ethical considerations

People were interviewed! The ethical issues (consent and Ethical clearance of study by hosting institution) regarding intellectual property has not been addressed in this paper!

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**SEE THE SEQUENCE OF THE KEY INFORMANTS QUESTIONED AND THE THEMES EXPLORED - PRESENTED IN THE METHODOLOGY - THAT SAME SEQUENCE SHOULD BE REPEATED HERE IN THIS SECTION! CURRENTLY, THE IS NO ALIGNMENT BETWEEN THESE 2 SECTIONS. THUS THE RESULTS/DISCUSSION SHOULD BE REFORMULATED, TO COVER ALL PARTS OF THE METHODOLOGY IN THE CORRECT SEQUENCE.**

~~Ratargul swamp forest is locally known as 'The Sundarbans of Sylhet'. The origin, development and existence of Ratargul swamp forest is totally water based. The source of this water is Chengerkhal, which is basically a lower part of Sari River sourced from Myntdu, Lamu and Umcaking rivers from Khaci Jaintia hill tracks (Partha, 2016, January 17). 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 amphibian (Choudhury, Biswas, Islam, Rahman & Uddin, 2004: 6-7) and 94 species of fishes among which 63 are survived and 28 species are threatened (Islam, Islam, Arofin, Rashid & Barman, 2016).~~

~~Before 2012, it was unknown to world's people and even the forest department of Bangladesh was also unaware about its special characteristics. After 27th September 2012, Anis Mahmud's picture published by the Daily Prothom Alo, tourists start visit this forest heavily to enjoy its natural beauty and forest department find out a new way to increase their income. This event and existing management of forest department hamper the natural course of the forest and shatter the local lives significantly. It is also evident that huge amount of tree logging and the existing leasing system of water bodies for fishing gain huge controversies by these days.~~

The above historical information needs to be relocated to and incorporated into the Introduction – this reviewer has relocated it.

#### **3.1 Organizations, Forms, Strategies and Process of the Movement**

**Below 4 paragraphs need to be formulated via the heading above and focus on:**

**Paragraph 1: Organizations of the movement**

**Paragraph 2: Forms of the movement**

**Paragraph 3: Strategies of the movement**

**Paragraph 4: Process of the movement**

In our study period we find that most of the seven organizations (local and national) working in different level for the organizing the movements. These organizations are: Bangladesh Poribeshbadi Andolone (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). Most of these organizations work on a volunteer basis. In most of the cases, they bear the expenses related to activism, from their own pocket and refusing to receive grants from outside of the organizations. Moreover, some group's activities are found in online. Ratargul Jolarban Songrokkhone Nagorik Uddog (online public group in Facebook, 1261 members) and Bhoomishontan Bangladesh Group (Followed by 1890 peoples). They share updates of their activities, feelings, invite people to join with them, spread awareness building slogan and pictures regarding Ratargul Swamp Forest. They also use awareness building stickers in their personal vehicles, publish calendars and shopping bags to raise make people more awareness and gather supports. Most of their slogans are like, 'Save Ratargul, Save Life', 'keep forest like what it is', 'Save Ratargul, Give Tree Begs', 'Stop This Demons, Save Ratargul', etc. These slogans express the sincere earnest request to the people to save the environment of Ratargul swamp forest – this statement is biased.~~

First 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 watch tower. They even questioned the forest department about their consciousness to protect the land of the forest. They also demand for controlling the flux of tourists in a planned way into the forest by implementing restricted tourism, rescue the land seized by the local people, stop the leasing system of the forest area, 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 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-email and mass-application send to the forest department and Ministry of forestry of Bangladesh government, etc. They also arranged an iconic bath for then the Minister of the ministry of environment and forest to change the attitude of 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 slow down gradually. On the year 2016, few organizations are 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, and also an awareness program for the boatman about how they can conserve the forest and guide tourists in a conservative way.

From the beginning, forest department has been denying the claims of activists. Forest Department implement a project of 536 lakh BDT most of which are spent for the construction of watch tower, bit office, park office, kitchen for tourists rest house, computer, TV, solar panel, AC, etc. It also includes CNG gas, engine boats, engine driven local boats, etc. In front of continuous resistance of environmental organizations, they completed the construction of watch tower in the middle of the forest and handed over the management of the forest to the Winrock International to implement CREL project.



### 3.2 Reactions and Negotiations

Below 2 paragraphs need to be formulated via the heading above and focus on:

Paragraph 1: Reactions of the movement

Paragraph 2: Negotiations with of the movement

Environmental activists started to visit that place again and again to see its condition and try to make local people who are related to this forest aware about its importance and try to build awareness on over-using the forest. On every Friday, activists made a visit in Ratargul Swamp Forest and they clean 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, 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 to the garbage collection activities being trained by movement organizer. Boatman's, who guided tourists to the forest with their boat, became aware about throwing wastes to the water and they started to collect the wastes from water and keep it in their boat. Most importantly, they begin questioning on the activities of the Forest Department.

In response, Forest Department initially offers money/bribe to the protesters but failed and then they introduce co-management under CREL project in the name of Ratargul Development in September 2015. CREL a neoliberal market-based five year plan which work for making an understanding between government and local people. CREL authority forms 10 Village Conservation Group, 1 People Forum, 1 co-management committee 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 are split between CMC and not CMC, where majority are CMC supporters.

Before CREL project started their work in Ratargul, villagers of Ratargul worked spontaneously for the conservation of the forest when inhabitants of other villages opposed them. But after CREL project being implemented in 10 villages of that area; 9 villagers joint at the beginning then Ratargul village. CREL first gathered people from other villages then Ratargul and include local powerful elites to their committees who can practice power over the villagers. They also extend financial help to the people which diverted few people from the movement. CREL and forest department arranged meetings with local people to make them understood about the importance of co-management. It was not easy for CREL authority to form a committee. It took two years to manage desired members from Ratargul village to complete the co-management committee. Getting continuous pressures and temptations villagers became confused and divided between two groups. Some people, who opposed to the co-management, also go to jail for the 'false' case filed by forest department. A group of people have changed their site from the movement to CREL and even some are working for both sides. Everything is now under control of CREL. 'Voice of the people', are not heard any more and their voices got down in front of the shouting of CREL supporters. Continuous rejection of environmentalist's demands throw 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 them think that the movement is completely a failure where 29.8% and 42.6 % of respondent call it respectively successful and partially successful. Though they are disappointed but they are not totally stopped. Awareness activities are still in the field.

In 2017, Besides CREL, Forest Department come with a new plan entitled “Sustainable Forestry and Livelihood” (SUFAL) where some strategies are mentioned regarding tourists visits, routes, watch tower, core and buffer zone demarcation. Forest Department claims, all of these strategies are adopted from the proposals of environmental activists and from the opinions of local people but activities and local people denied completely.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

[The twinge history of environmental movement in Ratargul is experienced directly by local people, Government/Forest Department. By deploying CREL and SUFAL projects Forest Department tries to control the movements and cultivates local people's perceptions towards Ratargul Swamp Forest and retains the control over the forest. These (like other USAID projects MACH, Nishorgo, IPAC) CREL and SUFAL projects are nothing new in forms and objectives. They just divide people and create supporters and clients from the protesters and manage the existing expropriation and appropriation of profit maximization from the forest instead of protecting. So the activities can be well described by a widespread Vietnamese saying that these initiatives are as 'old wine in new bottles' (McElwee, 2012: 422). It is revealed that Forest Department is successful due to lack of integration and coordination between the activists. Thus a strong, integrated, coordinated and organized form of resistance or movement is needed to shatter the hegemony of Forest Department that may save the Ratargul Swamp Forest from ongoing damage. This should briefly state the major findings of the study. If you are using copy-paste option then select 'match destination formatting' in paste option OR use 'paste special' option and select 'unformatted Unicode text' option]

#### COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

#### REFERENCES

1. Al-Hadi, A. H. (2016, July 18). Retrieved from: <http://www.talashbarta.com>
2. Choudhury, J. K., Biswas, S. R., Islam, M. S., Rahman, O., & Uddin, S. N. (2004). *Biodiversity of Ratargul Swamp Forest*. IUCN.
3. Islam, M. A., Islam, M. J., Arefin, S., Rashid, A. & Barman, S. K. (2016). *Factors affecting the fisheries biodiversity of Ratargul swamp forest of Sylhet district, Bangladesh*. IOSR Journal of environmental science, toxicology and food technology. Volume 10, Issue 1 Ver. 2. P. 60-65. Retrieved from: <http://www.iosrjournals.org>

- 328 4. McElwee, P. D. (2012). *Payments for environmental services as neoliberal*  
329 *market-based forest conservation in Vietnam: Panacea or problem?*.  
330 *Geoforum* 43 (2012) p. 412-426. doi:10.1016/j.geoforum.2011.04.010  
331 5. Partha, P. (2016, January 17). Retrieved from:  
332 <http://www.weeklykota.net/?page=details&serial=809>

333  
334  
335 THIS PAPER IS AN EFFORT TO INVESTIGATE THE SCOPE AND NATURE OF THE LOCAL  
336 ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT (INDICATE NAME OF THIS MOVEMENT) THAT SHAPE EXISTING  
337 MANAGEMENT PRACTICES. THE FOLLOWS FROM THE FACT THAT THESE MOVEMENTS ARE  
338 SUCCESSFUL IN RAISING LOCAL PEOPLE'S AWARENESS OF CONSERVATION. GIVE A FEW  
339 EXAMPLES OF ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS THAT ARE SUCCESSFUL IN RAISING AWARENESS IN  
340 LOCAL ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION AND INFLUENCED CONSERVATION PRACTICES.