

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

## ABSTRACT

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

**Study design:** –This paper is qualitative study and empirical research. It focuses on the impact of environmental movements going around Ratargul swamp forest to the forest and the local people.

**Place and Duration of Study:** This research was done on Ratargul swamp forest on Goainghat upazilla under Sylhet district and the study period was January 2016 to November 2017.

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

**Results:** It is revealed that as a result of different movement, people of Ratargul village are now more aware about the harmful activities of uncontrolled tourism and the forest department brings new management in response to the local and civil pressure. It is also viewed that (CREL) the new management actually works as a means to deactivating the strength of movement rather as a conservation strategy.

**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 shatter the hegemony of Forest Department that may save the Ratargul Swamp Forest from ongoing damage.

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

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Ratargul swamp forest of Sylhet, Bangladesh, one of the 22 fresh water swamp forest in the world (Al-Hadi, 2016, July 18), is a witness for environmental movement focused on its conservation. Since the exposure of Ratargul as a tourist spot, it has been experiencing uncontrolled and unregulated tourism activity. Mismanagement of forest department also attracts civil society. As a result, civil society organizations and local people call for movements to save this forest before being totally destroyed by these harmful activities. 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 conserve 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. It situated at latitude 25°00.025'N and longitude 91°58.180'E. Its position is between Moheshkher and Bogabari mouza. Chalitabari, Chainarpar, Jolurmukh villages are situated in its north and north-west; Aolarkut, Chanpur, Saheb 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 nearby Ratargul swamp forest. It includes 1,321 families with 8,267 total population who are somehow dependent to the forest. Among them the inhabitants of Ratargul village are 545, Jolurmukh Village 1,220, Chalitabari village 1,050, Alinagar village 209, Baghbari village 752, Dewanergaon village 490, Moheshkher village 1045, Shiala Village 1,325, and Ramnagar village 720 are under Gwainghat village. Again the population of 7 no. ward under Sadar upozilla is Aolarkut village 1,120.

This study focuses on the environmental movements related to 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. It also includes environmentalists of various organizations, government employees, and academicians who are related to the movement and the forest.

**2.3 Methods and tools of data collection:** 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 has been collected from the local people and environmental groups and from the forest department. Key informant interview, semi-structured interview, case study, focus group discussion and archival research are applied as the main data collection methods. To present the situation of movement, feelings of the activists, and their expressions regarding protests activities and government decisions about the forest, some pictures are present and interpret in this paper.

**2.4 Methods 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 and presented by table and graph with explanations.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

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

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**Comment [J3]:** Detail how each group of the sample was represented, eg. how many environmentalists, how many of the governmental organs ...

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**Comment [J7]:** -As the text lacks information, it is not possible to clearly understand where the actors want to come with the story. The case study can be very important for the region, for the conservation of the reserve, for the government and for the environmentalists, but, in the way it is presented, without contextualizations with the literature, it does not arouse the attention of the reader who is not from the region . Another weakness is that it does not present the perceptions of the different interviewees, as each organization is contemplated in practical terms in the management plan.

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~~<sup>nine</sup> 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, Arefin, 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.

Environmental activists and civil society identify these problems and started to protest against the new expropriation of this forest. It was the 22 October 2012, when a group of concerned people protests against this by growing awareness between local people and also forcing forest department to stop activities against the conservation of this forest. They form and involve a number of environmental groups to raise 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. But the environmentalists rejected to accept this management, because of the previous experiences from co-management projects in other forested areas of Bangladesh as the experiences of Nishorgo and IPAC in Lawachara National Park, Rema-Kalenga Wildlife Sanctuary and Satchari National Park were very much criticized by both activists and academics. Nevertheless, Government of Bangladesh implements CREL project in 2013. CREL started their activities with the full support and help from forest department and try to make people believe that it will alter and minimize the penetration on Ratargul from the outsiders. Within the few days of CREL inauguration the suspicion of local people and activities become true, which will be clearer in the later parts of this writing.

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

In our study period we find 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 volunteer basis. In most of the cases, they bear the expenses from their own pocket and refused to receive grant 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 1,890 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 make people more aware 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 earnest request to the people to save the environment of Ratargul swamp forest.

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

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 nine 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

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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]

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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