

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 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 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.

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

29 success but local people and activists call it as a government's neo-liberal strategy that
30 working to make the movement weaker and let the existing modes of management continue.

31 **2. MATERIAL AND METHODS**

32

33 **2.1 Study area:** - Ratargul is a freshwater swamp forest situated at Fotehpur union under
34 Gwainghat upozilla in Sylhet. It situated at latitude 25°00.025'N and longitude
35 91°58.180'E.29 Its position is between Moheshkher and Bogabari mouza. Chalitabari,
36 Chainarpar, Jolurmukh villages are situated in its morth and north-west; Aolarkut, Chanpur,
37 Saheb bazaar are in south, and Ratargul, Alinagar villages are in south-east side. Changer
38 khal, Shimul bil haor and Newa bil haor are also situated in its south.

39

40 **2.2 Study population:** *There are 9 villages nearby Ratargul swamp forest. It includes 1321*
41 *families with 8267 total population who are somehow dependent to the forest. Among them*
42 *the inhabitants of Ratargul village are 545, Jolurmukh Village 1220, Chalitabari village 1050,*
43 *Alinagar village 209, Baghbari village 752, Dewanergaon village 490, Moheshkher village*
44 *1045, Shiala Village 1325, and Ramnagar village 720 are under Gowainghat village. Again*
45 *the population of 7 no. ward under Sadar upozilla is Aolarkut village 1120.*

46 *This study focuses on the environmental movements related to Ratargul swamp forest and*
47 *the inhabitants of Ratargul are with this movement, this research takes the inhabitants of*
48 *Ratargul village as research population. Because Ratargul swamp forest is situated in the*
49 *map of Ratargul village only and they are related to the environmental movement of this*
50 *area. It also includes environmentalists of various organizations, government employees,*
51 *and academicians who are related to the movement and the forest.*

52

53 **2.3 Methods and tools of data collection:** Forty seven respondents were selected for the
54 primary data collection. They were selected by using stratified random sampling on the basis
55 of their level of involvement. Data has been collected from the local people and
56 environmental groups and from the forest department. Key informant interview, semi-
57 structured interview, case study, focus group discussion and archival research are applied
58 as the main data collection methods. To present the situation of movement, feelings of the
59 activists, and their expressions regarding protests activities and government decisions about
60 the forest, some pictures are present and interpret in this paper.

61

62 **2.4 Methods and tools of data analysis:** Data are analyzed by following 'Grounded-theory
63 approach' . Data collected by interviews and case studies are analyzed by sorting them
64 according to the theme and objectives of the study and presented by using MS word.

65 Data collected by studying archives are presented as snapshots as an example of
66 respondent's feelings, arrangement of protests activities during that time and interpret them.
67 Some pictures during the movement period, related to the study, are also included and
68 interpreted in various place.

69 Socio-economic condition of the respondents are processed by using MS excel and SPSS
70 and presented by table and graph with explanations.

71

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73 **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

74

75 Ratargul swamp forest is locally known as 'The Sundarbans of Sylhet'. The origin,
76 development and existence of Ratargul swamp forest is totally water based. The source
77 of this water is Chengerkhal, which is basically a lower part of Sari River sourced from

78 Myntdu, Lamu and Umsaking rivers from Khasi-Jaintia hill tracks (Partha, 2016, January
79 17). Biodiversity of Ratargul swamp forest contains 73 species of trees, 26 species of
80 mammals, 20 species of reptiles, 175 species of birds, 9 species of amphibian
81 (Choudhury, Biswas, Islam, Rahman & Uddin, 2004: 6-7) and 94 species of fishes
82 among which 63 are survived and 28 species are threatened (Islam, Islam, Arefin,
83 Rashid & Barman, 2016).
84 Before 2012, it was unknown to world's people and even the forest department of
85 Bangladesh was also unaware about its special characteristics. After 27th September
86 2012, Anis Mahmud's picture published by the Daily Prothom Alo, tourists start visit this
87 forest heavily to enjoy its natural beauty and forest department find out a new way to
88 increase their income. This event and existing management of forest department
89 hamper the natural course of the forest and shatter the local lives significantly. It is also
90 evident that huge amount of tree logging and the existing leasing system of water bodies
91 for fishing gain huge controversies by these days.
92 Environmental activists and civil society identify these problems and started to protest
93 against the new expropriation of this forest. It was the 22 October 2012, when a group of
94 concerned people protests against this by growing awareness between local people and
95 also forcing forest department to stop activities against the conservation of this forest.
96 They form and involve a number of environmental groups to raise the voice loudly. As a
97 response to these protests, government introduced a new management system to the
98 Ratargul swamp forest that is CREL (Climate- Resilient Ecosystems and Livelihood)
99 project, funded by USAID and implemented by Winrock International, as an initiative to
100 conserve the forest environment. But the environmentalists rejected to accept this
101 management, because of the previous experiences from co-management projects in
102 other forested areas of Bangladesh as the experiences of Nishorgo and IPAC in
103 Lawachara National Park, Rema-Kalenga Wildlife Sanctuary and Satchari National Park
104 were very much criticized by both activists and academics. Nevertheless, Government of
105 Bangladesh implements CREL project in 2013. CREL started their activities with the full
106 support and help from forest department and try to make people believe that it will alter
107 and minimize the penetration on Ratargul from the outsiders. Within the few days of
108 CREL inauguration the suspicion of local people and activities become true, which will
109 be clearer in the later parts of this writing.

110 111 **3.1 Organizations, Forms, Strategies and Process of the Movement**

112 In our study period we find seven organizations (local and national) working in different
113 level for the organizing the movements. These organizations are: Bangladesh
114 Poribeshbadi Andolone (BAPA), Ratargul Jolarbon Songrokkhon Committee (RJSC),
115 Bhoomishontan Bangladesh (BB), Ratargul Shobuj Biplob Shomity (RSBS), Green
116 Explore Society (GES), Pradhikar, and Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association
117 (BELA). Most of these organizations work on volunteer basis. In most of the cases, they
118 bear the expenses from their own pocket and refused to receive grant from outside of
119 the organizations. Moreover, some group's activities are found in online. Ratargul
120 Jolarban Songrokkhone Nagorik Uddog (online public group in facebook, 1261
121 members) and Bhoomishontan Bangladesh Group (Followed by 1890 peoples). They
122 share updates of their activities, feelings, invite people to join with them, spread
123 awareness building slogan and pictures regarding Ratargul swamp forest. They also use
124 awareness building stickers in their personal vehicles, publish calendars and shopping
125 bags to make people more aware and gather supports. Most of their slogans are like,
126 'Save Ratargul, Save Life', 'keep forest like what it is', 'Save Ratargul, Give Tree Begs',
127 'Stop This Demons, Save Ratargul', etc. These slogans express the earnest request to
128 the people to save the environment of Ratargul swamp forest.

129

130 First step for environmental movement regarding Ratargul swamp forest was against the
131 leasing system of its water reservoir, by arranging a village citizen meeting. One of the
132 main focuses of the protests of the environmental activists was to stop construction of
133 watch tower. They even questioned the forest department about their consciousness to
134 protect the land of the forest. They also demand for controlling the flux of tourists in a
135 planned way into the forest by implementing restricted tourism, rescue the land seized
136 by the local people, stop the leasing system of the forest area, stop any kinds of
137 construction in the forest area, restrict the entry of engine boats and using multiple routs
138 to visit the forest, identify core and buffer zone of the forest and restrict the core zone
139 from tourism to protect the animals, stop illegal fishing and poisoning for the purpose of
140 catching fish, follow international ecotourism policy to conserve this special forest from
141 waste thrown by the tourists and their environment unfriendly activities like throwing
142 stone to the forest animals, shouting, playing music's at a high volume, implement 'equal
143 distribution on the basis of co-operation' instead of implementing any exported
144 management project.

145 Environmental activists continued peaceful protests against governments several
146 decisions regarding this forest. Environmental organizations continued their peaceful
147 protests by arranging human chain, hunger strike, meeting, seminar, tree begging,
148 mass-email and mass-application send to the forest department and Ministry of forestry
149 of Bangladesh government, etc. They also arranged an iconic bath for then the Minister
150 of the ministry of environment and forest to change the attitude of government towards
151 Ratargul water bodies. But being continuously rejected by government and Forest
152 Department to accept their claims, they become hopeless and their force of activity slow
153 down gradually. On the year 2016, few organizations are found active. They arranged
154 seminar, press conference, 'eco-tour' with the purpose of providing their members a
155 practical idea regarding the conservation and strategy of ecotourism, wastage collection
156 program to clean the forest and make local people aware about this, and also an
157 awareness program for the boatman about how they can conserve the forest and guide
158 tourists in a conservative way.

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

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168 **3.2 Reactions and Negotiations**

169 Environmental activists started to visit that place again and again to see its condition and
170 try to make local people who are related to this forest aware about its importance and try
171 to build awareness on over-using the forest. On every Friday, activists made a visit in
172 Ratargul Swamp Forest and they clean the garbage thrown by the tourists. When local
173 people become assured about their modest feelings for the forest, they extended their
174 helping hand to them. Local people joined the movement by participating in different
175 protest activities like human chain in front of Sylhet Central Shohid Minar, cordoned the
176 office of bit officer in the Ratargul swamp forest and divisional forest officer near Kin
177 Bridge, tree-begging program of Bhoomishontan Bangladesh and also helped by
178 providing bamboos and other stuffs to plant the collected trees to the nearby area of the
179 forest. They also participate to the garbage collection activities being trained by
180 movement organizer. Boatman's, who guided tourists to the forest with their boat,
181 became aware about throwing wastes to the water and they started to collect the wastes

182 from water and keep it in their boat. Most importantly, they begin questioning on the
183 activities of the Forest Department.

184 In response, Forest Department initially offers money/bribe to the protesters but failed
185 and then they introduce co-management under CREL project in the name of Ratargul
186 Development in September 2015. CREL a neoliberal market-based five year plan which
187 work for making an understanding between government and local people. CREL
188 authority forms 10 Village Conservation Group, 1 People Forum, 1 co-management
189 committee and a co-management council. CREL work in Ratargul swamp forest from
190 September 2015 to October 2017. Within this time they tried to convince the local people
191 and divert them from environmental movement to co-management by showing financial
192 facilities. Now, the local people are split between CMC and not CMC, where majority are
193 CMC supporters.

194 Before CREL project started their work in Ratargul, villagers of Ratargul worked
195 spontaneously for the conservation of the forest when inhabitants of other villages
196 opposed them. But after CREL project being implemented in 10 villages of that area; 9
197 villagers joint at the beginning then Ratargul village. CREL first gathered people from
198 other villages then Ratargul and include local powerful elites to their committees who
199 can practice power over the villagers. They also extend financial help to the people
200 which diverted few people from the movement. CREL and forest department arranged
201 meetings with local people to make them understood about the importance of co-
202 management. It was not easy for CREL authority to form a committee. It took two years
203 to manage desired members from Ratargul village to complete the co-management
204 committee. Getting continuous pressures and temptations villagers became confused
205 and divided between two groups. Some people, who opposed to the co-management,
206 also go to jail for the 'false' case filed by forest department. A group of people have
207 changed their site from the movement to CREL and even some are working for both
208 sides. Everything is now under control of CREL. 'Voice of the people', are not heard any
209 more and their voices got down in front of the shouting of CREL supporters. Continuous
210 rejection of environmentalist's demands throw local people in hopelessness; they
211 believe, it might be better for the forest if they stay away from any protests activity. Even
212 23.4% of them think that the movement is completely a failure where 29.8% and 42.6 %
213 of respondent call it respectively successful and partially successful. Though they are
214 disappointed but they are not totally stopped. Awareness activities are still in the field.

215 In 2017, Besides CREL, Forest Department come with a new plan entitled "Sustainable
216 Forestry and Livelihood" (SUFAL) where some strategies are mentioned regarding
217 tourists visits, routs, watch tower, core and buffer zone demarcation. Forest Department
218 claims, all of these strategies are adopted from the proposals of environmental activists
219 and from the opinions of local people but activities and local people denied completely.
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223 **4. CONCLUSION**

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225 [The twinge history of environmental movement in Ratargul is experienced directly by local
226 people, Government/Forest Department. By deploying CREL and SUFAL projects Forest
227 Department tries to control the movements and cultivates local people's perceptions towards
228 Ratargul Swamp Forest and retains the control over the forest. These (like other USAID
229 projects MACH, Nishorgo, IPAC) CREL and SUFAL projects are nothing new in forms and
230 objectives. They just divide people and create supporters and clients from the protesters and
231 manage the existing expropriation and appropriation of profit maximization from the forest
232 instead of protecting. So the activities can be well described by a widespread Vietnamese
233 saying that these initiatives are as 'old wine in new bottles' (McElwee, 2012: 422). It is
234 revealed that Forest Department is successful due to lack of integration and coordination

235 between the activists. Thus a strong, integrated, coordinated and organized form of
236 resistance or movement is needed to shatter the hegemony of Forest Department that may
237 save the Ratargul Swamp Forest from ongoing damage. This should briefly state the major
238 findings of the study. If you are using copy-paste option then select 'match destination
239 formatting' in paste option OR use 'paste special' option and select 'unformatted Unicode
240 text' option]

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244 **COMPETING INTERESTS**

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Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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