

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

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ABSTRACT

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

Study design: This paper is a qualitative study and based on empirical research. It focuses on the impact of environmental movements around Ratargul Swamp Forest

Place and Duration of Study: This research is done around the Ratargul Swamp Forest located in on Sylhet district of Bangladesh. The study period was from January 2016 to November 2017.

Methodology: For the primary data collection, 47 respondents were selected by using purposive sampling on the basis of their level of involvement. Data was collected from local people, environmental groups and the forest department. Main data collection methods were via key informant interview, in-depth interview, case study, focus group discussion and archival research.

Results: People of Ratargul village are now more aware about the harmful activities of uncontrolled tourism while the Forest Department brings new management policies and practices in response to the local and civil pressure. It is also found that Climate Resilient Ecosystem Livelihoods (CREL) project in Bangladesh actually works to negate the strength of the environmental movement rather than as a conservation proponent. The Forest Department is successful to implement their projects due to a lack of coordination between local activists. According to the respondents, 31.1% mark this movement as successful, 23.4% as completely failure and while remaining 44.4% thinks that it is partially successful.

Conclusion: A strong, integrated, coordinated and organized form of resistance or movement is needed to break up the hegemony of Forest Department that may save the Ratargul Swamp Forest from ongoing damage.

Keywords: Environmental organizations, neoliberalism, CREL, sustainable development.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ratargul Swamp Forest of Sylhet District, Bangladesh, is one of the 22 fresh water swamp forests in the world (Al-Hadi, 2016). Before 2012, it was almost unknown to the general public and even the Forest Department of Bangladesh was also unaware about its special characteristics and the potentials. After 27th September 2012, Anis Mahmud's picture

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27 | published by the Daily ProthomAlo_(The Daily Prothom_Alo, 2012: 01), significant numbers of
28 tourists started to visit this forest to enjoy its natural beauty. This led to a number of issues
29 coming to the fore, which included the forest department levying gate fees as a new way to
30 increase their income, uncontrolled and unregulated tourism activities, as well as significant
31 increase of tree logging. In addition, mismanagement by the forest department also attracted
32 the attention of civil society group, they call and demonstrate different agitation against
33 Forest department and seek attention from political and government personnel which we
34 framed here as environmental movements that engage in persuasion of saving Ratargul
35 Swamp forest. Environmental activists and civil society have noted these new issues are
36 linked with a new mode of forest expropriation. It was on the 22nd of October 2012, when a
37 group of concerned citizens protested by advocating to increase awareness about the new
38 activities of forest department like building 'watch Tower' in the name of conservation of this
39 forest. They formed and involved a number of environmental groups to raise awareness
40 about the issues facing the forest. As a response to these protests, government for the very
41 first time invite a new management system to the Ratargul Swamp Forest that is CREL
42 (Climate- Resilient Ecosystems and Livelihood) project, funded by USAID and implemented
43 by Winrock International, as an initiative to conserve the forest environment (USAID, 2016).
44 But the environmentalists rejected this management initiative, because of previous
45 experiences from co-management projects in other forested areas of Bangladesh, such as
46 the experiences of Nishorgo and IPAC in Lawachara National Park, Rema-Kalenga Wildlife
47 Sanctuary and Satchari National Park where the initiatives were very much criticized by the
48 both activists (some activists are also actively participated in this movement) and academics.
49 The CREL authorities and CREL committee view this type of management strategy as a big
50 success, whereas most of the local people and activists perceive it as a government's neo-
51 liberal strategy that aim to weaken the local environmental movement and to preserve the
52 status quo. Nevertheless, Government of Bangladesh implemented CREL project in 2013.
53 CREL started their activities with the full support and assistance from the forest department
54 and they left by the 2018 dividing local and forest people into different groups (CREL people,
55 anti-CREL people, Skeptics, local environmentalists) kicking out the civil society based
56 environmentalists group from the scene.

57 This paper is an effort to investigate the scope and nature of the local environmental
58 movement regarding Ratargul Swamp Forest that shape existing management practices. It
59 shed lights on the nature of organizations, forms, process and strategies of the
60 environmental movement around Ratargul Swamp Forest. It aims to know the actions,
61 reactions and negotiations among different stakeholders during the Ratargul protection
62 movement.

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65 **2. MATERIAL AND METHODS**

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67 **2.1 Study area and Population**

68 Ratargul is a freshwater swamp forest situated at Fotehpur union under Gwainghatupazilla in
69 Sylhet District, Bangladesh. It situated at latitude 25°00.025'N and longitude 91°58.180'E.29.
70 It contains total 504.50 acres of forest area which was announced as a "Special Biodiversity
71 Conservation Area" by the People's Republic of Bangladesh on 31/05/2015. The type of
72 ecotourism going on Ratargul called 'community based ecotourism' (Jahan and Akhter,
73 2018:3). Ratargul swamp forest is locally known as 'The Sundarbans of Sylhet'. The origin,
74 development and existence of Ratargul swamp forest is totally water based. The source of
75 this water is Chengerkhal river. Biodiversity of Ratargul swamp forest contains 73 species of
76 trees, 26 species of mammals, 20 species of reptiles, 175 species of birds, 9 species of
77 amphibian (Choudhury et al, 2004: 6-7) and 94 species of fishes among which 63 are

78 survived and 28 species are threatened (Islam et al, 2016). It also contained around 73
79 species of tree (Choudhury et al., 2004).

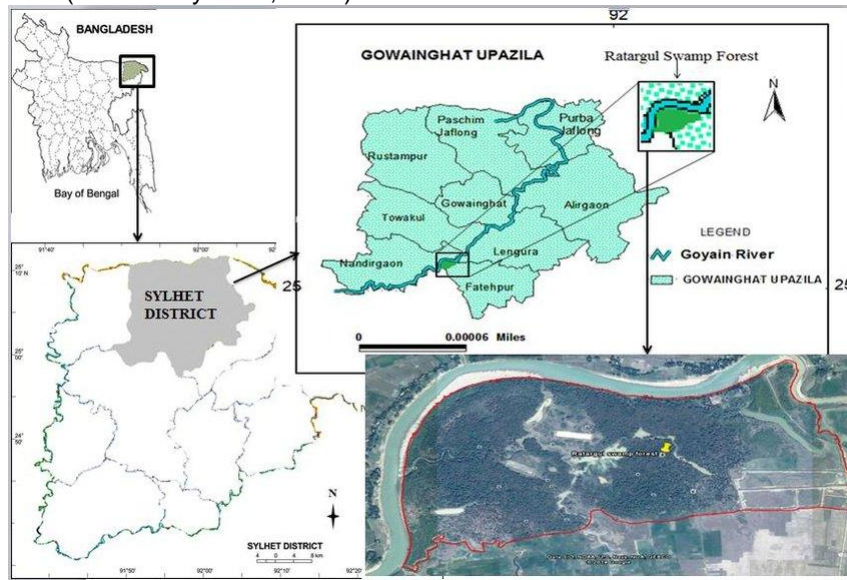


Fig. 1. Map of Ratargul Swamp Forest (Islam, et. al., 2016: 52)

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84 There are 9 villages located around Ratargul Swamp Forest, consists of 1321 families and
85 8267 people. Among them 22 people are purposively selected for IDI and Case study on the
86 basis of their level of involvement to the movement.

87 This study focused on the native people's involvement in local environmental movements
88 (activities are human chain, hunger strike, meeting, seminar, tree bagging, mass-email send,
89 oushodisnan (iconic bath with nim tree for mental healing, etc.)) related to the Ratargul
90 Swamp Forest. Further key informants included environmentalists (n=7) of various
91 organizations (i.e. Bangladesh Poribeshbadi Andolone (BAPA), Ratargul Jolarbon Songrokkhon
92 Committee (RJSC), Bhoomishontan Bangladesh (BB), Ratargul Shobuj Biplob Shomity
93 (RSBS), Green Explore Society (GES), Pradhikar, and Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers
94 Association (BELA), are interviewed. Besides KII we conducted in-depth interviews and case
95 studies of 11 activists from different organizations, government employees (n=4), and
96 academics (n=3) who are involved or respond to the movements. In total 47 respondents
97 were purposively selected for the primary data collection.

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2.3 Methods and tools of data collection

100 The study period was from January 2016 to November 2017. Data were collected via 25 in-
101 depth interviews (IDI) and 7 key informant interview scheduled with a checklist, conducting
102 10 case study and 2 focus group discussions are discussed. Observation is mainly used for
103 cross-check the information and archival research (to collect news related to the movement
104 regarding Ratargul Swamp Forest, online activities of the respondents and movements
105 organizations during the movement period and recent time are observed to check and collect
106 data validity) also being used for this study.

107 To elucidate the environment in which the movements operate, aspects related to
108 organizations, forms, strategies and process, feelings of the activists, and their expressions
109 regarding protests activities and government decisions about the forest are the subject of
110 investigation.

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112 2.4 Data analysis

113 Data are analyzed by following 'Grounded-theory approach'. Data analyzed by sorting them
114 according to the theme and objectives of the study and presented by using MS word. Case
115 studies and focus group discussions were recorded in both notebook and audio recorder and
116 then transcribe verbatim to analyze by following test method. Archival data also used and
117 interpreted.

118 2.5 Ethical considerations

119 All participants were selected fairly. An adequate, complete and understandable written
120 consent form was approved by the respondents. Privacy of the data was highly protected
121 and respondents had their right to ask any kinds of question regarding the research. There
122 was written agreement with the patronizer of the research.
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124 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

125 3.1 Organizations, Forms, Strategies and Process of the Movement

126 In our study period we find that all the seven organizations (local and national) work on a
127 volunteer basis. The movement was started with the organizations like *Bangladesh*
128 *PoribeshbadiAndolone* (BAPA), Green Explore Society (GES), *Pradhikar*, and Bangladesh
129 Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA). At the beginning, it was limited within the
130 member of civil society. Later they included local people and then some new organizations
131 were formed which are *RatargulJolarbonSongrokkhon Committee* (RJSC), *Bhoomishontan*
132 Bangladesh (BB) and *RatargulShobujBiplobShomity*(RSBS). These organizations included
133 both local people and environmentalists to reach their goals to conserve Ratargul Swamp
134 Forest.
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136 The first step of the movement was some meeting and seminars arranged by BAPA, BELA
137 and later they include other environmental organizations GES and Pradhikar to increase
138 their support. But they feel that these were not enough until they include the local people
139 who are actual beneficiaries of the forest. *RatargulJolabonSongrokkhon Committee* and
140 *RatargulShobujBiplobShomity* were formed when local people become fell the importance of
141 the conservation of the forest and involved directly.
142 *RatargulJolarbanSongrokkhoneNagorikUddog*(online public group in Facebook, 1261
143 members) and *Bhoomishontan Bangladesh Group* (Followed by 1890 peoples) were formed
144 as online public group in Facebook created to make more people aware about this as
145 nowadays most of the people use internet. They share updates of their activities, feelings,
146 invite people to join with them, spread awareness building slogan and pictures regarding
147 Ratargul Swamp Forest. They also use awareness stickers on their personal vehicles,
148 publish calendars and shopping bags using slogans like, 'Save Ratargul, Save Life', 'keep
149 forest like what it is', 'Save Ratargul, Give Tree Begs', 'Stop This Demons, Save Ratargul',
150 etc. to raise awareness and gather support.

151 First step for environmental movement regarding Ratargul swamp forest was against the
152 leasing system of its water reservoir, by arranging a village citizen meeting. One of the main
153 focuses of the protests of the environmental activists was to stop construction of watch
154 tower. They even questioned the forest department about their consciousness to protect the
155 land of the forest. They also demand for controlling the flux of tourists in a planned way into
156 the forest by implementing restricted tourism, rescue the land seized by the local people,
157 stop the leasing system of the forest area, stop any kinds of construction in the forest area,
158 restrict the entry of engine boats and using multiple routs to visit the forest, identify core
159 and buffer zone of the forest and restrict the core zone from tourism to protect the animals, stop
160 illegal fishing and poisoning for the purpose of catching fish, follow international ecotourism
161 policy to conserve this special forest from waste thrown by the tourists and their environment
162 unfriendly activities like throwing stone to the forest animals, shouting, playing music's at a

163 high volume, implement 'equal distribution on the basis of co-operation' instead of
164 implementing any exported management project. Environmental activists continued peaceful
165 protests against governments several decisions regarding this forest. Environmental
166 organizations continued their peaceful protests by arranging human chain, hunger strike,
167 meeting, seminar, tree begging, mass-email and mass-application send to the forest
168 department and Ministry of forestry of Bangladesh government, etc. They also arranged an
169 iconic bath for then the Minister of the ministry of environment and forest to change the
170 attitude of government towards Ratargul water bodies. But being continuously rejected by
171 government and Forest Department to accept their claims, they become hopeless and their
172 force of activity had slowed down gradually. On the year 2016, few organizations are found
173 active. They arranged seminar, press conference, 'eco-tour' with the purpose of providing
174 their members a practical idea regarding the conservation and strategy of ecotourism,
175 wastage collection program to clean the forest and make local people aware about this, and
176 also an awareness program for the boatman about how they can conserve the forest and
177 guide tourists in a conservative way.
178 Environmental activists started to visit that place again and again to see its condition and try
179 to make local people who are related to this forest aware about its importance and try to
180 build awareness on over-using the forest. In most of the cases, they bear the expenses
181 related to activism, refusing grants from the wealthy agents. Moreover, some group's
182 activism are found in online. On every Friday, activists made a visit in Ratargul Swamp
183 Forest and they clean the garbage thrown by the tourists. When local people become
184 assured about their modest feelings for the forest, they extended their helping hand to them.
185 Local people joined the movement by participating in different protest activities like human
186 chain in front of Sylhet Central ShohidMinar (Martyr Tomb), cordoned the office of bit officer
187 in the Ratargul swamp forest and divisional forest officer near Kin Bridge, tree-begging
188 program of *Bhoomishontan* Bangladesh and also helped by providing bamboos and other
189 stuffs to plant the collected trees to the nearby area of the forest. They also participate to the
190 garbage collection activities being trained by movement organizer. Boatman's, who guided
191 tourists to the forest with their boat, became aware about throwing wastes to the water and
192 they started to collect the wastes from water and keep it in their boat. Most importantly, they
193 begin questioning on the activities of the Forest Department.

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196 **3.2 Reactions and Negotiations**

197 From the beginning, forest department has been denying the claims of activists. Forest
198 Department implement a project of 536 lakh BDT most of which are spent for the
199 construction of watch tower, bit office, park office, kitchen for tourists rest house, computer,
200 TV, solar panel and AC. It also includes CNG gas, engine boats and engine driven local
201 boats. In front of continuous resistance of environmental organizations, they completed the
202 construction of watch tower in the middle of the forest and handed over the management of
203 the forest to the Winrock International to implement CREL project. It increased the flow of
204 the movement. In response, Forest Department initially offers money/bribe to the protesters
205 but failed and then they introduce co-management plan under CREL project in the name of
206 Ratargul Development in September 2015. CREL is a market-based program. It was a five
207 year plan which work for making an understanding between government and local people.
208 CREL authority forms 10 Village Conservation Group, 1 People Forum, 1 co-management
209 committee and a co-management council. CREL work in Ratargul swamp forest from
210 September 2015 to October 2017. Within this time they tried to convince the local people
211 and divert them from environmental movement to co-management by showing financial
212 facilities. Now, the local people are split between CMC and not CMC, where majority are
213 CMC supporters.
214 Before CREL project started their work in Ratargul, villagers of Ratargul worked
215 spontaneously for the conservation of the forest when inhabitants of other villages opposed

216 them. But after CREL project being implemented in 10 villages of that area; nine villagers
217 joint at the beginning then Ratargul village. CREL first gathered people from other villages
218 then Ratargul and include local powerful elites to their committees who can practice power
219 over the villagers. They also extend financial help to the people which diverted few people
220 from the movement. CREL and forest department arranged meetings with local people to
221 make them understood about the importance of co-management.

222
223 It took two years to manage desired members from Ratargul village to complete the co-
224 management committee. Getting continuous pressures and temptations villagers became
225 confused and divided into different groups. Some people, who opposed to the co-
226 management, also conceived jail for the 'false' case filed by forest department. A group of
227 people have changed their role from the movement to CREL and even some are working for
228 both sides. Everything is now under control of CREL. 'Voice of the people', are not heard
229 any more and their voices got down in front of the shouting of CREL supporters. Continuous
230 rejection of environmentalist's demands throw local people in hopelessness; they believe, it
231 might be better for the forest if they stay away from any protests activity. Even 23.4% of
232 them think that the movement is completely a failure where 29.8% and 42.6 % of respondent
233 call it respectively successful and partially successful. Though they are disappointed but they
234 are not totally stopped. Awareness activities are still in the field.

235 In 2017, Besides CREL, Forest Department come with a new plan entitled "Sustainable
236 Forestry and Livelihood" (SUFAL) where some strategies are mentioned regarding tourists
237 visits, routs, watch tower, core and buffer zone demarcation. Forest Department claims, all
238 of these strategies are adopted from the proposals of environmental activists and from the
239 opinions of local people but activities and local people are not agreed with them.

240

241 **4. CONCLUSION**

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243 There are a number of examples those are successful to protect the environment. As an
244 example "the Phulbari resistance" in Borogram, Phulbari sub-districts (upazilla), Bangladesh,
245 can be named. This resistance was started from the estimation of the economic loss of the
246 country and the environmental threat to rivers and the water supply caused due to the
247 mining project in Phulbari. This protest was successful and they halt the mining project
248 (Nuremowla, 2016:02). The twinge history of environmental movement in Ratargul is
249 experienced directly by local people, Government/Forest Department and it has also impact
250 on the management of swamp forest. By deploying CREL and SUFAL projects Forest
251 Department tries to control the movements and cultivates local people's perceptions towards
252 Ratargul Swamp Forest and retains the control over the forest. These (like other USAID
253 projects MACH, Nishorgo, IPAC) CREL and SUFAL projects are nothing but new in forms
254 and objectives. They just divide people and create supporters and clients from the protesters
255 and manage the existing expropriation and appropriation of profit maximization from the
256 forest instead of protecting. So the activities can be well described by a widespread
257 Vietnamese saying that these initiatives are as 'old wine in new bottles' (McElwee, 2012:
258 422). It is revealed that Forest Department is successful due to lack of integration and
259 coordination between the activists. Thus a strong, integrated, coordinated and organized
260 form of resistance or movement is needed to shatter the hegemony of Forest Department
261 that may save the Ratargul Swamp Forest from ongoing damage.

262

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278 **COMPETING INTERESTS**

279

280 Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

281

282 **AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS**

283

284 This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Author KMJ designed the
285 study, wrote the protocol, managed the literature searches and wrote the first draft of the
286 manuscript. Author AFMZ has assisted to design the research tools making, data analysis
287 and supervised the whole work. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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