

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

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

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66 **2. MATERIAL AND METHODS**

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68 **2.1 Study Area and Population**

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

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

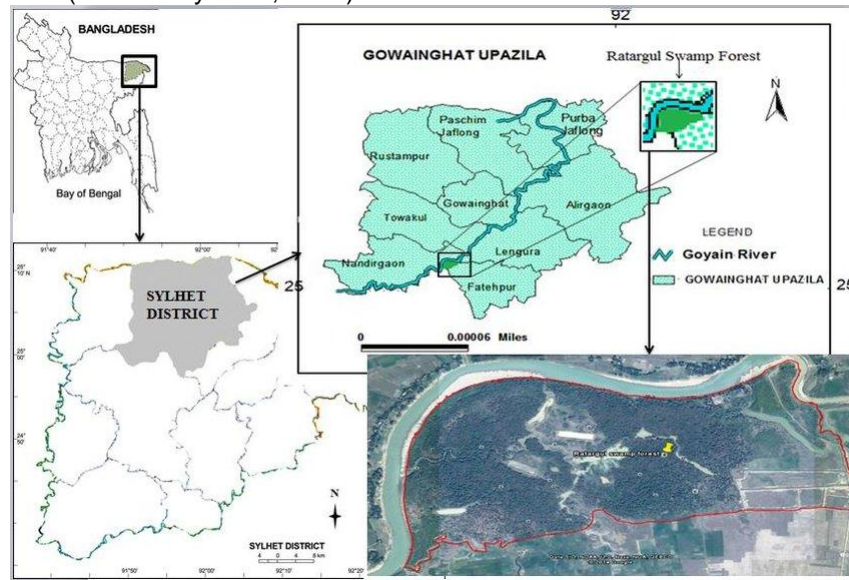


Fig. 1. Map of Ratargul Swamp Forest (Islam, et. al., 2016: 52)

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85 There are 9 villages located around Ratargul Swamp Forest, consists of 1321 families and
86 8267 people. Among them, 22 people are purposively selected for IDI and Case study on the
87 basis of their level of involvement to the movement. This study focused on the native
88 people's involvement in local environmental movements (activities are a human chain,
89 hunger strike, meeting, seminar, tree bagging, mass-email send, oushodisnan (iconic bath
90 with nim tree for mental healing, etc.)) related to the Ratargul Swamp Forest. Further key
91 informants included environmentalists (n=7) of various organizations
92 (i.e. Bangladesh Poribeshbadi Andolone (BAPA), Ratargul Jolarbon Songrokkhon Committee
93 (RJSC), Bhoomishontan Bangladesh (BB), Ratargul Shobuj Biplob Shomity (RSBS), Green
94 Explore Society (GES), Pradhikar, and Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association
95 (BELA), are interviewed. Besides KII we conducted in-depth interviews and case studies of
96 11 activists from different organizations, government employees (n=4), and academics (n=3)
97 who are involved or respond to the movements. In total 47 respondents were purposively
98 selected for the primary data collection.

99

100 2.3 Methods and tools of data collection

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

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

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113 2.4 Data analysis

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

119 **2.5 Ethical considerations**

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

125 **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

126 **3.1 Organizations, Forms, Strategies and Process of the Movement**

127 In our study period, we find that all seven organizations (local and national) work on a
128 volunteer basis. The movement was started with the organizations like *Bangladesh*
129 *PoribeshbadiAndolone* (BAPA), Green Explore Society (GES), *Pradhikar*, and Bangladesh
130 Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA). In the beginning, it was limited within the
131 member of civil society. Later they included local people and then some new organizations
132 were formed which are *RatargulJolarbonSongrokkhon Committee* (RJSC), *Bhoomishontan*
133 *Bangladesh* (BB) and *RatargulShobujBiplobShomity*(RSBS). These organizations included
134 both local people and environmentalists to reach their goals to conserve Ratargul Swamp
135 Forest.
136

137 The first step of the movement was some meeting and seminars arranged by BAPA, BELA
138 and later they include other environmental organizations GES and Pradhikar to increase
139 their support. But they feel that these were not enough until they include the local people
140 who are actual beneficiaries of the forest. *RatargulJolabonSongrokkhon Committee* and
141 *RatargulShobujBiplobShomity* were formed when local people become fell the importance of
142 the conservation of the forest and involved directly.
143 *RatargulJolarbanSongrokkhoneNagorikUddog*(online public group in Facebook, 1261
144 members) and *Bhoomishontan Bangladesh Group* (Followed by 1890 peoples) were formed
145 as an online public group in Facebook created to make more people aware about this as
146 nowadays most of the people use the internet. They share updates of their activities,
147 feelings, invite people to join with them, spread awareness-building slogan and pictures
148 regarding Ratargul Swamp Forest. They also use awareness stickers on their personal
149 vehicles, publish calendars and shopping bags using slogans like, 'Save Ratargul, Save
150 Life', 'keep forest like what it is', 'Save Ratargul, Give Tree Begs', 'Stop This Demons, Save
151 Ratargul', etc. to raise awareness and gather support.

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

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

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197 **3.2 Reactions and Negotiations**

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

215 Before the CREL project started their work in Ratargul, villagers of Ratargul worked
216 spontaneously for the conservation of the forest when inhabitants of other villages opposed
217 them. But after CREL project being implemented in 10 villages of that area; nine villagers
218 joint at the beginning then Ratargul village. CREL first gathered people from other villages

219 then Ratargul and include local powerful elites to their committees who can practice power
220 over the villagers. They also extend financial help to the people who diverted a few people
221 from the movement. CREL and forest department arranged meetings with local people to
222 make them understood the importance of co-management.
223

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

236 In 2017, Besides CREL, Forest Department comes with a new plan entitled "Sustainable
237 Forestry and Livelihood" (SUFAL) where some strategies are mentioned regarding tourists
238 visits, routes, watchtower, core and buffer zone demarcation. Forest Department claims, all of
239 these strategies are adopted from the proposals of environmental activists and from the
240 opinions of local people but activities and local people are not agreed with them.
241

242 **4. CONCLUSION**

243
244 There are a number of examples that are successful to protect the environment. As an
245 example "the Phulbari resistance" in Borogram, Phulbari sub-districts (Upazila), Bangladesh,
246 can be named. This resistance was started from the estimation of the economic loss of the
247 country and the environmental threat to rivers and the water supply caused due to the
248 mining project in Phulbari. This protest was successful and they halt the mining project
249 (Nuremowla, 2016:02). The twinge history of the environmental movement in Ratargul is
250 experienced directly by local people, Government/Forest Department and it has also impact
251 on the management of swamp forest. By deploying CREL and SUFAL projects Forest
252 Department tries to control the movements and cultivates local people's perceptions towards
253 Ratargul Swamp Forest and retains the control over the forest. These (like other USAID
254 projects MACH, Nishorgo, IPAC) CREL and SUFAL projects are nothing but new in forms
255 and objectives. They just divide people and create supporters and clients from the protesters
256 and manage the existing expropriation and appropriation of profit maximization from the
257 forest instead of protecting. So the activities can be well described by a widespread
258 Vietnamese saying that these initiatives are as 'old wine in new bottles' (McElwee, 2012:
259 422). It is revealed that the Forest Department is successful due to the lack of integration
260 and coordination between the activists. Thus a strong, integrated, coordinated and organized
261 form of resistance or movement is needed to shatter the hegemony of Forest Department
262 that may save the Ratargul Swamp Forest from ongoing damage.
263

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279 **COMPETING INTERESTS**

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281 Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

282

283 **AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS**

284

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

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