



Research Paper

Resilience and Survival in the Sundarbans as Depicted in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island* published in 2019 captures the resilience of ordinary human beings in the Sundarban in West Bengal. The Sundarban region has been environmentally susceptible even before climate change began to make its impact. This paper looks at the impact of the cyclones that have continuously battered the Sundarban delta and studies the desperate survival strategies adopted by the hapless population to confront their problems. The drastic impact of natural calamities and climate change on the inhabitants of the region are analysed alongwith the link between calamities and human trafficking networks.

Keywords: Storm surges, Devastation, Human trafficking, Salinity, War, Cyclones, Dalits, Vulnerability.

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I. Introduction:

Gun Island chronicles the desperate lives of hapless people caught in a never-ending and vicious cycle of climate induced devastation. Battered by cyclones, storm surges and coastal erosion people get caught in ruthless and apathetic human trafficking networks, spread out across Asia and Europe. The novel describes the plight of Dalits like Tipu and his mother, who struggle to eke out a living in an extremely hostile terrain. The difficult living conditions in the region are a result of the indiscriminate destruction of the mangroves by natural calamities as well as exploitation by various ruthless post-colonial establishments.

Gun Island depicts the dangerous journeys undertaken by the vulnerable people of Sundarbans to escape from the endless whorl of calamities that afflict the region on a regular basis. Climate refugees like Rafi, Tipu and many others, cross over from India to Bangladesh, Pakistan, Iran, Kurdish territories, and Turkey to finally arrive in Europe, with the help of unscrupulous human trafficking networks that feed on the desperation of vulnerable people.

Destructive cyclones, dangerous storm surges, sea water intrusion are the common problems in the low-lying coastal areas of the Sundarbans. This has increased both soil and freshwater salination levels in the Sundarban delta villages. Close-knit village communities with sustainable ways of life are gradually disintegrating because of the displacement caused by treacherous weather patterns and changing riverways. Deprived of their means of survival and livelihood, communities are perpetually being erased and eroded in the Sundarban region. Desperation has led to largescale migration of people from the region. But people cannot hope to migrate to foreign climes via legally sanctioned channels. They are forced to rely on human traffickers who prey on their desperation and vulnerability. They trap them in exploitative extortionist rackets and provide them as fodder to the lucrative businesses of prostitution, organ trade and the illegal labour market. Ghosh writes in *Gun Island* that:

European imperial powers had launched upon the greatest and most cruel experiment in planetary remaking that history had ever known: in the service of commerce they had transported people between continents on an almost unimaginable scale, ultimately changing the demographic profile of the entire planet. But even as they were repopulating other continents they had always tried to preserve the whiteness of their own metropolitan territories in Europe. (Ghosh, 279)

Sundarbans is gradually perishing and both humans and animals are trapped in a cycle of frequent displacements, failed livelihoods and rapacious human traffickers. Dinanath Datta or Deen is the Bengali American protagonist and narrator of the novel. He meets Nilima Bose, the founder of the Badabon Trust, a charity organisation that works in the Sundarbans. She belonged to a wealthy Kolkata family, but had married a

poor schoolteacher and moved to the Sundarbans. She began the trust to help the vulnerable population of the region.

On November 12, 1970, the region had been ravaged by the deadly Bhola cyclone. The devastation caused by the cyclone spread across West Bengal in India and what was then East Pakistan. Categorised as the world's deadliest tropical cyclone by World Meteorological Organisation's World Weather and Climate Extremes Archive, it wiped out more than three hundred thousand people. The events in *Gun Island* unfold in the backdrop of Cyclones Bhola, Aila and other extreme weather phenomena. Ghosh chronicles the plight of a people who are reduced to displacement and impoverishment by virtue of unsustainable policies and actions.

In the aftermath of the Bhola cyclone, Nilima and her team of volunteers had travelled to the cyclone ravaged villages and distant islands scattered across the Sundarban delta. They saw islands with leafless trees, floating dead bodies, some of them mauled by animals, and the never-ending flow of refugees from erstwhile East Pakistan. The indifference and apathy of the Pakistan government towards the plight of the cyclone ravaged masses of East Pakistan led to the 1971 war and the subsequent creation of Bangladesh. Nilima and her team travelled along the Raimangal river, which had "different countries on its two shores" (Ghosh 14), India on one shore and Bangladesh on the other side. Years later, the old and frail Nilima tells Deen that, "The islands of the Sundarbans are constantly being swallowed up by the sea; they are disappearing before our eyes" (Ghosh 18). So, Deen goes on his journey to the Sundarbans and meets two enigmatic youngsters Tipu and Rafi.

Land distribution in densely populated India is inequitable and the underprivileged have been forced to settle in the low-lying coastal areas. The World Bank publication *Coping with Climate Change in the Sundarbans: Lessons from Multidisciplinary Studies* published in 2020, has assessed the impact of increasing river-water salinity, and scarcity of water for agriculture during the dry season in the area. Rise in salinity has reduced the availability of freshwater fish in the Sundarban waterbodies, which are an important part of the regular diet of most households in the region. Erratic and extreme weather events destroy boats, fishing nets, mud houses of the inhabitants and the embankments built to prevent coastal erosion. The report states that, "Currently, the Sundarbans is one of the highest impact zones for tropical cyclones in the Bay of Bengal" (Dasgupta et al. xvi).

The gradually shrinking Sundarbans delta is home to the world's largest mangrove forests and this landscape of rivers, mudflats, creeks and estuaries spread out across West Bengal and the neighbouring country of Bangladesh, is an endangered ecosystem. Formed by the convergence of the Brahmaputra, Ganga and Meghna rivers, it is a Ramsar site on the IUCN Red List of endangered ecosystems. Climate change vulnerability studies were carried out by researchers in small administrative blocks called mouzas (in parts of Pakistan, Bangladesh and India) in the Sundarbans. Researchers calculated the composite vulnerability index (CVI) of the villages in the Sundarbans to natural calamities. Their findings reported in the article "Natural Hazard induced Coastal Vulnerability in Indian Sundarbans: A village-level study by using geospatial and statistical techniques" published on the *ScienceDirect* website in October 2024 state that about 30.50% of the villages in the area are extremely vulnerable to natural disasters. About 12.06% of the villages are in "the very high vulnerability category" (Hasnin and Nagdeve). The entire region is susceptible to storm surges, waterlogging, entry of saline water into agricultural lands, and perpetual coastal erosion, which began even before the changes in the climate.

This area is home to millions of impoverished people who face multiple debilitating problems due to the increasing frequency and intensity of cyclones in the Bay of Bengal. Since the 1990s, effective storm warning systems installed across the coastal regions of West Bengal in India, and Bangladesh have led to mass evacuation of people from the cyclone-prone zones, prior to landfall. But the Aila cyclone in 2009 left behind a devastating trail of destruction and its impact on the families and communities in the Sundarban villages was unprecedented.

Ghosh describes the scale of the impact of Aila, "Hundreds of miles of embankment had been swept away and the sea had entered places where it had never entered before; vast tracts of once fertile land had been swamped by salt water, rendering them uncultivable for a generation, if not forever" (Ghosh 48). Entire villages had been evacuated and many people decided not to return to the calamity-stricken region after the storm. Recurring cyclonic storms have led to resource precarity of unimaginable proportions. Communities have been thrown asunder and the basic principle of the survival of the fittest comes into play all over the affected area. The young people moved to the towns in search of better lives and most of them ended up in slums. Women, children and old people were left behind to fend for themselves in the hostile and unpredictable environment.

Glaring poverty and the absence of sustainable means of survival paved the way for human traffickers to prey on the vulnerable communities living there. In the aftermath of Aila, the traffickers swooped in and started luring women and young girls to faraway places with promises of better lives. They were sold off to brothels in other parts of India. Most of the male villagers approached contractors in search of work in distant lands. Inland freshwater resources are scarce. Despite being surrounded by water, the attempts to dig wells are futile, because as Ghosh writes in *Gun Island*, "an arsenic-laced brew gushed out of the soil" (Ghosh 49). When the people tried to salvage their fields with embankments, the high tides and storm surges destroyed them. The

unforgiving land and the apathy of the administration makes the inhabitants easy prey for human traffickers. Necessity drives them to become indifferent and inhuman to their fellow beings and they don't hesitate to trap their neighbours in the human trafficking racket to earn some money.

Deen Datta in *Gun Island* embarks on a journey to the Sundarbans. He boards a van full of women and children in Kolkata. The front seats were occupied by the trust members and at the back were the colourfully dressed sex workers and their children. They had been caught by the police from various brothels across Kolkata and passed on to the Badabon Trust. Most of the women were from the Sundarbans and they were unhappy about the rehabilitation schemes provided by the trust. The women argued that the wages provided by the trust were inadequate, and Moyna herself admitted that they did not have enough funds. She also said that most of the women would soon return to the red-light areas to support themselves and their children. The trust had been grappling with such a depressing situation since cyclone Aila hit the Sundarbans.

Tipu was a Dalit boy who had been helped by Neelima's young Bengali American friend Piya. She was a marine biologist in a university in Oregon and spent some time, every year, in India; helping Nilima manage the activities of the Badabon trust. When he was thirteen years old, Piya had taken her with him to America. But she could not give him adequate care and attention as she was busy travelling in connection with her research. Soon he was trapped in the wrong crowd and got into trouble with the police also. So, Piya took him back to the Sundarbans. His mother was surprised by the changes in his appearance and behaviour. He had changed his name from Tutul to Tipu and it was difficult for him to adapt to the school in his village in the Sundarbans. So, Piya enrolled him in a residential school in Kolkata.

Tipu's American experience had changed his attitude and personality. This made him unpopular with the teachers and students in his new school. Moreover, his situation in the school deteriorated when the others learned that he was a Dalit boy from the Sundarbans. One of his classmates had made a derogatory statement that "only servants and whores came from the Sundarbans" (Ghosh 51). Tipu had lost his temper and beaten up the boy. He had been rusticated and forced to return to his village. Tipu had made up his mind not to continue with his education.

Ritwika Mitra's article in *The Fuller Project* newsletter titled "In the Sundarban, climate change has an unlikely effect – on child sex-trafficking" quotes Barun Kanjilal. Kanjilal, a health economist says that, "When the climate is affected, it immediately creates ripple effects. The minors are on the fringes" (Mitra). Tipu is a teenager "on the fringes". He was articulate in American English and skilled in the use of technology. He would disappear for days together without informing Moyna. Deen meets Tipu when he arrives at Basonti in the Sundarbans. Tipu is an intriguing character and his clothes and American accent baffle Deen. Tipu maintains a patronising and amused attitude towards the middle-aged Deen and it often irritates him.

Deen is shocked to learn that Tipu has often travelled illegally to Madaripur in Bangladesh by crossing the Raimangal river. He informs Deen that he is in, "The people-moving industry" (Ghosh 60). Tipu points out the lucrative nature of human trafficking by pointing out that "turnover last year was in the billions" (Ghosh 60). His disenchantment with the land of his birth is evident when he explains to Deen that he "is offering an essential service" (Ghosh 60). Tipu points out that people in the Sundarbans are extremely poor and illiterate. They used to eke out a livelihood by "fishing or farming or going into the jungle to collect bamboo and honey" (Ghosh 60). But the situation has changed because "the fish catch is down, the land's turning salty, and you can't go into the jungle without bribing the forest guards" (Ghosh 60). He also remarks on the increasing frequency of high-intensity storms that destroy everything. People were desperate to leave the area and Tipu facilitated their movement to other places with the help of the Internet and his phone. The phone and its voice recognition technology helped in establishing connections between middle men or *dalas* and the aspiring migrants.

Tipu is proud of the fact that he can help arrange illegal passports by circumventing the official network. He explains that every migrant in the trafficking circuit needs an effective back story so that the authorities of the particular nation are convinced and provide asylum. He says that the Swedes do not care about starvation, flooded lands, arsenic-infused waters or debt-ridden farmers. He explains "- None of that shit matters to the Swedes. Politics, religion and sex is what they are looking for- you've gotta have a story of persecution if you want them to listen to you. So that's what I help my clients with; I give them those kinds of stories" (Ghosh 62). Tipu is unapologetic about what he does and he connects them to the middle-men after they have raised the necessary amount of money.

Deen also meets another enigmatic and intriguing youngster- Rafi. Rafi's mother had died and the teenager was alone in the world. Tipu and Rafi get into a relationship and Tipu felt that they should move to Europe so that they can be together and free. Tipu himself becomes a victim of the vicious human trafficking enterprise when he and Rafi begin their difficult and dangerous journey to Europe via Bangladesh. So, the boys crossed the Raimangal River and stayed in Dhaka for two weeks. Then they travelled to Benapol in West Bengal in a minivan with other men. They were accompanied by a few agents of the Bangladeshi middle-man. Rafi refers to these agents as "jackals" (Ghosh 237). The bribes had already been paid to the immigration officials by the middle-men and the group walked into India from Bangladesh.

From the Benapol immigration checkpoint they were taken to a “connection house” (Ghosh 237) in Kolkata and locked inside. Twenty of them were put in two rooms and they had a single bathroom. Any dissent or unwarranted movement outside the room was met with harsh beatings. Three days later they were transported to the Pakistan border. The men were packed inside an old and smoky truck with a bad suspension. They were asked to provide more money for further transportation. When Tipu questioned them, they dragged him into another room, beat him up and were planning to insert a stick into his private parts when he had a seizure and behaved in a scary manner. Finally, Tipu paid the money and they travelled to the Iranian border where they were asked to pay more money.

Tipu told Rafi that he must continue with the journey even if something happened to him. They reached a Kurdish village and there were men from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran. All of them were waiting to cross into Turkey. A few days later they were asked to board a truck and were left somewhere near the Turkish border. They were told to run across the Turkish border. They were shot at by the guards at the border. In the ensuing melee, Tipu fell down and could not escape to Istanbul with Rafi. Rafi arrives in Venice and takes up multiple jobs to help Tipu escape from the dreaded connection house in Egypt where he is trapped with many other migrants.

II. Conclusion:

Cyclones and climate change are responsible for the unholy nexus between brutal human traffickers and dealers involved in prostitution, organ trade and low-paid labour. The novel ends on a positive note with possible reparation for the asylum seekers, including Tipu, travelling to Sicily on a perilous sea journey. In the real world, human trafficking continues unabated, alongside irreversible climate change.

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