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My name is Pratik Nayak. I am currently studying in Xavier Law School, XIM UNIVERSITY BHUBANESWAR. I enjoying reading and writing about social issues. From a very young age I have been taking part in various occasions where I get a chance to voice my opinions.

With a knack for being restless, often indecisive but at the same time, passionate, I am always ready to take up new endeavors to challenge myself. Scrolling various Jstor articles to documentaries on my Screen, I hope to write more and open new pathways for learning of all sorts of topics.

Undoing Injustice in the Sundarban Delta

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Climate action is one of the 17 sustainable development goals formulated and put forth by the United Nations, effective to be entirely implemented by 2030. One of the foremost objectives of this goal is to "educate" communities at a grassroots level regarding their immediate environmental needs and effective ways to sustain available resources. Such a target invariably presupposes that the understanding of their immediate surroundings by grassroots-level communities or those indigenous to a location is somewhat lacking. The two lakh "tribal" people currently facing a perpetual threat of climate-induced migration in the Sunderban delta they call home are victims of this very dismissal of their pre-existing knowledge systems owing to policies of the Indian and Bangladeshi governments to homogenise and instruct the Adivasi communities of the land in conservation and climate awareness. The idea of the Anthropocene defines an era where "human" and "environment" are separate, solitary entities where human effects on the environment alter it to a great extent. The issue with the majoritarian discourses emerging from this understanding completely ignores indigenous communities' cultural and ritualistic belief systems.

Michael Wessels wrote on Southern African indigeneity, "The idea of the environment is a modern one, the product of a certain separation from a life lived on the land and the formations of consciousness that attended the shift to urbanisation" (119). The politics of loss and conservation of the environment have thus been under the manipulation of colonial and capitalist devices since they encroached upon the land and rights of the Adivasis. One fails to unsee this long-drawn connection between the realm of territorial inhabitation and that of the belief systems of these communities. Indeed the initial conflict between Orientalists and indigenous tribes was not so much over land as it was about what was considered and recognised as knowledge. The earliest weapons of colonisation were missionaries that preached the gospel. This aim to define indigenous cultures in European terms is what created the binary of the primitive, superstitious tribal as opposed to the Western-educated, scientific colonisers. The ramifications of such a hegemonic formulation still persists — as is evident from the displaced adivasis of the Sundarban delta — in the form of a loss of land, resources, and of dignity, owing more to an unfair, inequitable approach of policymakers towards these areas and its inhabitants rather than fluctuations of climate.



The settlers of the Sundarbans need hardly to be enlightened on the adverse effects that climate, coupled with imperial exploitation, has had on their environment since the 18th century. Like the periodic cyclonic storms that have long invaded this area, the British government has been the founding cause of severe deforestation of natural vegetation in these parts. Home to the world's largest mangrove forest, the Sundarbans have a preliminary layer of protection from the cyclones ravaging this area at frequent intervals. However, the revenue policies of the then magistrate of Jessore ensured the complete destruction of what he saw as "totally unproductive" forests. The power to reap benefits from these lands was wholly vested in the landowners — a tradition that continues to this day. The same devices that disregard the Adivasi's rights over their land are the ones that recognise the Midnapuris as the upper echelon of the Sundarbans society. The landowners of present-day - these people are not among those indigenous groups that have been set in a state of constant flux over the last two decades since cyclone Aila hit the Bangladesh coast in 2009, causing severe damage to life and property in the Sundarban delta.

The 2011 Census recorded the Adivasi population in this region at 2,11,927. Current records show the number dwindling at an alarming 1,79,719. Of the 102 recorded islands that form a part of this delta, 54 are currently uninhabitable due to thick mangrove growth and submersion due to flooding during the storms and rising sea levels (Basu). The discourse of climate "educators" of this area directly levy charges of the irresponsible use of land and agricultural practices on the alarmingly decimating Adivasi population as the cause for Sundarban's current state. This statistical education, of course, fails to account for the fact that the tribal communities of this area receive little to no aid from the government and are virtually left alone to recuperate after the cyclones, each larger and more catastrophic than the last, ravage their homes.



Image Credit: Shutterstock

This attempt to redefine the realities of the Adivasis has been rampant since the infiltration of capitalism. In the 1940s, anthropologists Evans-Pritchard and Malinowski recognized the functional significance of tribal belief systems in the organisation of society. They observed that religious beliefs and practices played a major role in regulating social interactions, maintaining social order, and supporting economic activities in tribal communities (Prasad 11).



Image Credit: Shutterstock

Their research highlighted the intricate interconnections between religion, economy, and social organisation within these societies. The inseparable nature of religion and economy becomes a point of distinction between capitalism and pre-capitalist societies. The conflation of the base and the superstructure in the Adivasi economy becomes evident in anthropological studies that attribute norms of wealth accumulation and distribution to customs and religious beliefs. While Indian Marxist scholars might not necessarily agree with this, an analysis of the primitive myths of the Sundarbans Delta elucidates this distinction quite easily.

The main deity worshipped by the people in the delta is Bonbibi. Though her origins are disputed, Bonbibi is "worshipped" by Hindus and Muslims alike as the protector of the sacred mangrove forests, protecting the land from all harm — be it violent storms, external threats, or the man-eating tigers that inhabit these forests. Interestingly the main adversary of Bonbibi and her brother Shah Jongoli is the tiger-shaped monster, Dokkhin Rai. In various retellings of this myth (dating back to the Ray Mangal Kabya of 17th century Bengal), Dokkhin Rai was originally an upper-caste Hindu priest who wanted to gain control of the land that belonged to the Adivasis who were ostracised in their own territory. Bonbibi defeated the treacherous Dokkhin Rai in battle and banished him deep into the forest.

A corollary to this myth is the lore of Dukhi and Dhona and how Bonbibi came to be regarded as the patron saint of the people of these marshlands. Dukhi and Dhona, both poor honey collectors, had travelled far in search of good quality honey. Once they reached Dokkhin Rai's territory, the demon revealed himself to the greedy Dhona and asked him for a human sacrifice in exchange for all the honey and wealth that the land had to offer. Tempted, Dhona left the island, leaving Dukhi to be devoured by the demon. The helpless Dukhi prayed to Bonbibi, who came to his rescue, once again banishing Dokkhin Rai back into his demarcated territory. Dukhi was rewarded for his faith, only in lieu of his promise that none of his people would ever venture into these lands to exploit its resources ever again (Haldar).



The myth of Bonbibi thus treats the forests of Sundarbans as a symbolic source of both religion and of the means of production that sustains the people. Violating the law of Bonbibi becomes concurrent with a violation of the Adivasi's homeland. The belief system of the indigenous communities whose realities shape their folkloric traditions finds a solid grounding in this myth. The people of this land have been exploited and terrorised by various versions of Dokkhin Rai — the demonic priest, for centuries, be it in the form of colonisers, governments, or powerful landowners. With the induction of capitalism came the infiltration of caste in these communities. According to various socio-cultural studies conducted in the Sundarbans, the second stratum of the societal order comprises both Hindus and Muslims — mostly refugees from East Pakistan post-Partition (1971). These migrants are no strangers to the marginalisation that seems to grip these parts, having suffered massacres at the hands of the Left government of West Bengal in Morichjhanpi. However, most of these settlements were formed at the cost of hundreds of displaced adivasis that were the original inhabitants of these lands. The current census records various Adivasi sects like Chandals, Bagdis, and Nomoshudras residing in these parts (Basu). However, most of them have had to adopt the homogenised surname Sardar to be recognised as one collectively marginalised *jaati*.

The material realities of the Adivasis inhabiting these parts have long been placed at loggerheads with their value systems. The main point of contention of the aforementioned Indian Marxists is thus that these very systems of hierarchy that exist in tribal society become the means by which they are incorporated into the capitalist regime of exploitation of resources and of labour (Prasad 11). Where the rituals and practices of these communities used to be a mode of subversion of power structures, the very norms of the folk culture were pitted against its own people and used as a tool to justify external hierarchies and integrate them into these systems of oppression. The oath to Bonbibi has long been violated, and their sacred forests have been drained dry of its bounteous yield. The Adivasi has been deceived of their own rights and manipulated to believe that putting their faith in the forest deity and her army of spirits was partially responsible for the undoing of their land and livelihood.

A quick internet search will tell you that the Sundarban delta is submerged (quite literally) under the weight of a vast multitude of climatic dysfunctions, varying in severity and requiring immediate action. In the case of the Adivasis of Sundarbans, their lack of internet facility hardly deters them on this account as they are at any given time surrounded by a host of climate change messiahs that are more than ready to give them a blow-by-blow of the ill effects of the storms, the rising water level and increasing salinity; the flaw in their agricultural practices (one that was imposed upon them to expedite and maximise production) that is depleting their own land of more resources than the cumulative efforts of 2 governments; above all the surviving human population is in a dialectical relationship of destruction with their own islands — the adverse conditions here slowly decimates their population while their desperate attempts at survival ensure the annihilation of its resources.



Image Credit: The Statesman

Even though the Adivasis never had any rights over their own homeland, the onus of sustaining it and restoring it to its former glory somehow falls upon them. With huge directives issued by the state and other saviours, the people are being told what to do in order to avoid suffering more loss than they already have. The people of the Sundarbans are a cautionary tale unto themselves.

It is hardly fair to bring in the question of justice where people have been denied their basic rights for so long that receiving enough aid to survive harsh every day realities seem like acts of great providence. For a group that is struggling to recuperate from three centuries worth of systemic deprivation, a demand for them to be “environmentally aware” is surely a huge ask. It is thus far from just to introduce new methods of land cultivation and water use, imposing strict laws of conservation for a people who have never known the plenitude of their own realm. For a community that congregates over the faith in their folkloric traditions, recurrent calamity, and misfortune have successfully shaken their faith in the Bondevi that swore to protect them for eternity. As Dokkhin Rai's bloodlust increases and the once lush jungles of terrifying beauty make immeasurable sacrifices to appease his ravenous hunger, the Adivasis are robbed of any sense of security or hope for a future.

Talks of climate justice are no doubt welcome here. I would even say that it is necessary. However, what needs to be reconsidered is the very definition of this term that has been universalised for far too long. I believe a reversal of years of erasure of the people of these islands, their rituals, culture, and practices is foremost in order. Justice, one that is long overdue, once meted out to the people of this land, will be the only kind of justice that can save these parts from the throes of adverse climate. Dictates of the Anthropocene, pitting man against nature, fail in the land of lush mangroves where people lead an amphibious existence between the natural and the material. Bonbibi still reigns undefeated in the hearts of these forests and its people alike. If you ever have the good fortune to visit these parts, you will know that they are one and the same.

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Tales and Tides: Climate Justice and Fishermen Community in Kerala

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Elelo Elabalelo Ele Elelo
Elelo Elabalelo Ele Elelo
Are you still angry, Oh sea
When you overflow, our huts will be washed away
Elelo Elabalelo Ele Elelo
Elelo Elabalelo Ele Elelo

For the past few years, the anguished songs of fishermen have been echoing along the shores of Kerala. In the tumultuous battle against coastal erosion, a crucial narrative of climate justice and its denial has emerged from the fishing communities in the state. Various fishermen’s families started a rallying call for justice, demanding a fair and equitable response to the impending crisis. Climate justice, a concept firmly rooted in the recognition of historical inequalities, requires an understanding of intersecting socio-economic factors. From the drought-stricken communities in Africa to the hurricane-ravaged islands of the Caribbean, marginalised populations who have contributed the least to the problem bear the brunt of environmental degradation disproportionately.

With hundreds of families losing their homes and several people being relocated from their residences, coastal erosion has become a grave threat to the residents on the shore. It primarily affects the fishing community, which is socially and economically marginalised but has a long tradition of earning a livelihood from the sea. This problem forces them to choose between the ocean and the giant – either dealing with ongoing problems caused by erosion or giving up their fishing profession and moving to urban areas. Their situation is considered a grave injustice because coastal erosion has been worsened by thoughtless human activities done in the name of progress. In order to cater to the demands of a specific group in society, the livelihoods of fishermen have been abandoned and left without support.