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Need for the care of the "Tiger Widows" in Sundarban: Struggle and discriminations

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Abstract
A significant proportion of the population in the villages of Sundarban in India depend on the natural resources of the forest reserve and the river for their livelihood. While carrying out their activities in the forest, many forest dwellers have become victims of tiger attacks. Most of the forest dwellers are poor and landless. The husbands are the sole breadwinners of the family, and after their early accidental death, the widows are plunged into extreme poverty and great hardship. In addition, they become socially isolated due to the cultural stigma associated with killing tigers in the local community or society. (Jamala, et.al.). They are accused of unnatural and untimely death of their husbands and very often they are stigmatised and labelled as "swami khego" or "husband eaters" by the local community. They are forced to live in separate hamlets (widow settlements) outside the village called bidhoba palli, reflecting their outcast status and social isolation. After the death of their husband, all economic burdens fall on their shoulders and they are plunged into unimaginable poverty, but there are no job opportunities. (Chowdhury). The present case studies from a village in the Gosaba block in the southern 24 parganas of India's Sundarban reflect the sufferings and ongoing life struggle of these "tiger widows" as well as the cultural stigma that excludes them from the normal community life of Sundarban; the resulting negative impact on their mental health is discussed.

Keywords: Stigmatized, misfortune, harbinger, traumatised, mentally distressed

Introduction

The world's largest mangrove forest is located at the mouth of the Ganga and Brahmaputra rivers between India and Bangladesh. It has the status of a National Park, a World Heritage Site and a World Biosphere Reserve. Its name: Sundarban. In the Sundarbans, there are many islands whose boundaries are protected by sea walls made of locally produced bricks and mud (Gopal & Chauhan). This largest tidal delta and mangrove forest is extremely important for the conservation of the endangered Royal Bengal Tiger, crocodiles, monitor lizards, snakes, mudskippers and many other species. The mangrove forest of the Sundarban, which stretches over 10,000 square kilometres between India and Bangladesh, is home to about 98 (in the Indian Sundarban area) Bengal tigers, many of which are man-eaters.

The soils of these islands have a very high clay and salt content. There are seasonal problems with drinking water shortages and tidal flooding, so soil salinity is a critical problem. There is very little cultivable land, which is destroyed every year by tidal salt water or flooding. Many households have a pond for fishing, which is filled with fresh or rainwater during the monsoon, but even these ponds are often polluted by the saltwater tide. A certain number of population groups are directly and indirectly dependent on forest resources. Most people in the Sundarban subsist on the forest and the river and earn their livelihood by collecting wild honey and fishing. People in the villages on the fringes of the Sundarban are directly dependent on the resources of the forest and river and easily fall prey to tiger attacks during their activities in the forest reserve. Although it is illegal to enter the core area of the tiger reserve, the Sunderban villagers have no alternative means of survival, and since the fish and crab yields in the buffer zone are not very high, they have no choice but to risk their lives every day.

There is an old Bengali saying: 'Jol e kumir, daanga e bagh', which means "crocodile in the water, tiger on the land'," meaning danger from all sides. Although it is illegal, many go into the restricted areas (the Sundarban are part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site) to collect forest resources, and this brings them into direct conflict with the tiger. But the authorities claim the opposite, we have warned them, but they don't listen to us. If they sell big crabs and collect more pure honey, they get more money. So they take a risk to earn more. The big cats or the Royal Bengal Tiger attack humans for various reasons, but rarely do they target humans as prey. The local communities live mainly from agriculture and forest resources. Many family members are forced to go to protected forest areas to forage for food and firewood, collect honey, trap caribou and other forest resources. (Pletcher) In the world of Banbibi, the tiger rules the forest and the poor villagers are forced to take the risk. They keep going into the mangrove forests to fight hunger and easily fall prey to tiger attacks. Thus, the number of tiger widows is increasing day by day. (Dutta). According to the government, the number of tiger attacks per year is more than 60. There are an estimated 3000 tiger widows in India who live without any social support and are forced to go to the same dangerous forests to support their families. (Nayak).

In the patriarchal Indian society, widows lose their social and cultural identity after the death of their husbands. The untimely unnatural death and tiger killings inflict further suffering on tiger widows due to the cultural stigma of tiger attack. They are labelled as "unholy and evil women" by the local community and blamed for the death of their husband. (Ali-Mahmood). This kind of blame game leads to verbal, physical and psychological abuse for most widows. Cultural rules in this local community force tiger widows to live in isolation, not to socialize with other men, to wear white sarees (as opposed to married women's colored sarees), not

to wear jewelry or bangles, etc., and they are considered a sign of "unholiness" and unhappiness. All these cultural stigmas and enforced rules have excluded them from normal life and they live in separate hamlets (widow settlement), reflecting their outcast status and social isolation. (Ablon).
This study focuses on the socio-economic conditions and the impact of widowhood on all aspects of their lives such as mental and physical health, suffering and life struggle, all of which are closely linked to the stigma associated with tiger killing. This kind of labeling and blaming leads to verbal, physical and psychological abuse for most widows. (Debnath). They are also shunned because they are unlucky. As a researcher, I use case studies to examine how they are marginalized and isolated and the dangers they face.

Literature review

There are very few books on this subject to understand and analyses the scenario, struggle and discriminations of Tiger Widows" in Sundarban. Chakarborty (1995) [5], depicts the everyday life of villagers and terrible life story, the dark side of the marginalized people of Sundarban. Chowdhury and Chowdhury (1999) [10], discuss quality of life and mental health in the Sundarbans Delta region of India. Pramanik (2000) [23], showed that the inhabitants of the Sundarban peoples and their various activities to earn their living. Chowdhury, et. al. (2001), highlight human-tiger conflict in the Sundarbans delta region of West Bengal. Mukherjee (2003) [20], showed the human dependency on forest resource and tiger-human conflicts in the Sundarban Tiger Reserve in West Bengal. Ojha and Chakraborty (2009) [22], discussed living coditions of the Sundarbans people, shadow of the tiger in their daily lives etc. Niyogi (2009) [21], highlights the tiger cult in the Sundarbans in India through the Anthropological Survey of India. Chakraborty (2010) [6], tells the story of human-tiger conflict in the Sundarbans. Dutta (2011) [15], discussed the cultural rules and worship of 'Ma Bonobibi' in the land of the tigers, Sundarban. Das (2014) [11], showed the livelihood of the Sundarbans islanders, their livelihood, problems and struggles of daily life. The study by Chowdhury et. al., (2016), showed the stigmatisation of tiger widows after tiger attack in Sundarban Delta, India. It also highlights culture and stigma through ethnographic case studies of tiger widows in India's Sundarbans. Ghosal (2016) [16], discussed about tiger victims, scars and stigma of tiger widows in Indian Sundarbans in a study. Debnath (2020) [12], described the social rejection of tiger widows in the Indian Sundarban. Chakraborty (2022), described the struggle life of Sundarban peoples and their disputes, their daily activities and various religious rituals, believes associated with it in his book Anuvobe Sundarban.

Objectives

- To examine their struggle, livelihoods and cultural stigma.
- How they are ostracised, isolated and the perils they live in and face.

Methodology

The study is based on primary data. Ten case studies were conducted, focusing mainly on widows whose husbands were killed by the Royal Bengal Tiger. Additionally, ten villagers were randomly selected as a respondents and data was collected through a structured questionnaire to achieve the research objectives.

Research Area

The data for this study were collected from Biddha Gram in Mollakhali, located in the Gosaba Block of South 24 Parganas District, adjacent to the Sundarban Reserve Forest.

Result findings

There are two reasons for the conflict between tigers and humans in Sundarbon. The humans are attacked by the tigers when they are in the forest, especially in the Royal Bengal Tiger Reserve area, to collect forest resources (to get more and pure resources), which is illegal. Another reason is that after floods (every year) the fresh water ponds in the forest are polluted by salt water and the tigers come to the area to drink fresh water. So people easily become victims of tiger attacks and the number of these incidents is increasing day by day, so the number of widows in the nearest villages in Sundarban is steadily increasing. The widows are ostracized overnight for bringing misfortune and untimely death to their husbands. (Denzau and Denzau). In Bengali, they are called Bagh Bidhoba, which means widows whose husband was killed by the tiger. These tiger widows are socially, culturally and economically victimized in the society.
The ethnographic history of all tiger widows speaks of insurmountable suffering, economic hardship and social discrimination they faced after the death of their husband due to tiger attacks. For this work, I conduct several in-depth interviews with tiger widows and observe their mental health. At the same time, I observe the behaviour or mentality of their neighbours. They are neglected and disregarded in the community because both the neighbours and society as a whole regard them as bad women and hold them responsible for the unnatural death of their husband. They are considered unfavourable (apaya) and bad and dangerous (alakhxmi) and are seen as the cause of misfortune. They are stigmatized as unlucky and are referred to as "swami-kheko" in Bengali, which means she who eats her husband, and this kind of slang is detrimental to their mental health. For many women in the region, life is a struggle for survival. (Chowdhury, et. al.).

Socio Cultural stigma

Stigma is a socially constructed discomfort that certifies the poor evaluation of a certain aspect of behaviour. Social constraints prevent tiger widows from remarrying and their daily lives are governed by various social norms and restrictions. Many of the tiger widows are in their early to late thirties and have a few young children, but in addition to the social stigma of killing tigers, they lose the opportunity to remarry because they are blamed for their husband's death. Widowers whose wives have been killed by tigers, on the other hand, do not have to abide by cultural rules, are not stigmatized as 'wife-eaters' and have no restrictions on social participation, including remarriage. Participation in all rituals, including any kind of social ceremony in society, is associated with many restrictions for them. This is a glaring example of gender discrimination in this society. Surprisingly, after the death of her husband in a tiger attack, she becomes the target of all social oppression, both from her own family and the local community. In the

patriarchal society, their presence would bring bad luck. These unethical and prejudiced social practices largely jeopardize the normal course of widows' lives, questioning their economic security and affecting their dignity, self-esteem and inclusion in society. (Chowdhury, et.al.). They very often face social ostracism, physical and emotional humiliation and psychological trauma, which leads to an immediate threat to social order. Tiger widows in the Sundarban endure various cultural and religious stigmas after their husbands are killed by tigers, and their widowhood has a heightened impact on all aspects of their lives, especially their spiritual and psychological well-being. Tiger widows do not find a friendly place in the mainstream of society and find themselves in the stereotypical social fabric due to stigmatisation. The socio-cultural construction of stigma associated with tiger attacks has not only marginalised them but also deprived them of social justice and made them vulnerable to mental illness. A new social dichotomy has emerged in the deltaic regions of tiger widows. They are seen as evil and sinister and are forced to live in isolation without any social interaction with others. They are considered a sign of misfortune and are referred to as ‘Swami Khego’ which means she is responsible for her husband death. Apart from humiliation and discrimination, they also face extreme economic difficulties. (Ghoshal). In several places in the Sundarban, they are forced to live in a segregated hamlet called bidhoba palli, reflecting their status as outcasts of the community.

Tiger widows in the Sundarban face significant socio-cultural stigma based on gender discrimination and superstition. They are blamed for the death of their husbands and labelled as ‘Swami Khego’ (husband-eaters), leading to social ostracism, economic hardship and restricted participation in rituals and social events. Unlike widowers, they cannot remarry and are considered unlucky in a patriarchal society. These women are emotionally, physically and psychologically abused, which further reinforces their marginalization. Their status as outcasts, often living in isolated hamlets like ‘Widow Hamlet’ (Bidhoba Palli), deprives them of social justice and exacerbates their vulnerability to mental illness, while their exclusion from mainstream society persists. (Chowdhury, et. al.).

Religious stigma

Bonbibi is considered the tutelary deity of the people of the Sundarban forests. A tiger attack is considered an omen and is associated with Bonbibi. Bonbibi is the personification of the forest, which offers the islanders safety and security. This moral and spiritual ethos is deeply rooted in the social and cultural corridors of the islanders and is passed down from generation to generation. The worship of Bonbibi is not about salvation, but about security, not spirituality. According to the islanders, Bonbibi's bring wrath and curse on those who dare to disobey Bonbibi. Thus, myth and worship are intertwined. In Sundarban communities, the following rituals are often considered “good luck rituals": When the husband goes exploring in the forest, the wife must say a prayer to Bonobibi. They must not light a fire under the hearth, eat a non-vegetarian meal, wash clothes, make new clothes or jewellery, or groom themselves. They should not renew the vermilion on their foreheads. They also do not comb their hair, do not cross the river, do not participate in any social or religious festival and avoid talking to other male members of the community. These rituals are strictly observed until the husband returns. (Halder). Attacks by tigers are considered blasphemy or an indication that Bonbibi’s anger and incense haunt the person and offer no help from tiger attacks. This kind of societal perception of tiger widows leads to a sense of guilt and cursedness settling in the minds of the widows, affecting their psychological well-being. When the community rejects them as unfortunate, it aggravates their trauma and stigmatization. Tiger widows are accused of unnatural and untimely death of their husbands and very often they are stigmatized and called "swami kheko" or "husband-eaters". This abuse often takes the form of sexual assault by the widows' in-laws. These factors lead to long-term deterioration of mental health and increase the risk of mental disorders and even suicide. (Chowdhury, et. al.).

A 64 years old widow said that ‘Aj amar swami gelo kal onno joner, ei vabe eker pore bidhoba bereche tai bidhoba para nam hoyeche. Age onek chilo edik sedik sob chole geche, Loke kharap bole amra naki opoya’. (Yesterday, Tiger took my husband and next will be another one. One by one, the widows grew and that's how this place came to be known as 'Widow Lane. There used to be many people here, but now they’ve all gone their separate ways. People say bad things about us—they call us 'unlucky' as if we had a choice).

The religious stigma surrounding Bonbibi and tiger widows in the Sundarbans reflects a deeply rooted cultural belief that links spiritual practices to community behaviour and survival. Bonbibi, the forest deity, embodies both protection and anger, and tiger attacks are perceived as a sign of her disfavour. The associated rituals, such as the prohibition of social activities and grooming when a husband ventures into the forest, are aimed at appeasing Bonbibi and ensuring safety. However, if a tiger attack leads to the husband's death, the widow is socially ostracized, branded as ‘unlucky’ and often further mistreated. This stigmatization exacerbates her trauma and leads to psychological damage and marginalization. (Chakrabarty). Labelling widows as "husband-eaters" perpetuates their victimization and deepens the cycle of guilt, rejection, and deteriorating mental health, highlighting the harmful intersection of religious beliefs, gender, and social exclusion.

Discrimination in home and in community

This study shows that tiger widows are more stigmatised than other widows. Tiger widows are labelled as ‘unholy and evil women’ by in-laws and the community and are blamed for the unnatural death of their husbands. In 90% of widows, the in-laws' family, especially the mother-in-law, holds them responsible for the death of their son (swami-khego – ‘husband-eater’) and considers them a sign of misfortune and a harbinger of doom. This labelling and blaming leads to verbal, physical and psychological abuse for most widows. (Dutta).

They are subjected to numerous cultural restrictions, social hostility and brutality in the name of ‘cultural and religious norms’ The cultural rules have resulted in tiger widows living in isolation and having no social contact with other male members. They live in isolation, have to wear white sarees (as opposed to coloured sarees for married women) and are not allowed to wear jewellery or bangles. They are not invited to any wedding or social function as they are considered a sign of ‘unholiness’ and bad luck. They are not

invited to any sacred ceremony; they are expected to stay away from sacred occasions because they are 'cursed'. (Niyogi). Their presence at a festival or puja can disturb the sanctity of the event. Their face should not be seen first thing in the morning or before others start a good work so that no one sees their face first thing in the morning. It is believed that the whole day could be fruitless or bring danger to anyone who sees them on the first morning. (Halder). All these cultural stigmas and enforced rules have excluded them from normal life in the community. Hence, they live in segregated hamlets in Sundarbon called Bidhoba Palli, which openly reflects their outcast status and social isolation.

A primary teacher of this village said that, 'Baghe kauke niye gele porer din theke oi poribarer upor sanghatik vabe manosik o orthonoitik biporjoy neme ase, bises kore oi poribarer mohilader upor. Protibesider theke o nanan obohelar swikar hoy. Kono samajik anusthane nimontron pay na.'(When a tiger takes someone, from the next day onwards, the family experiences collective psychological and economic distress, especially the women of the family. They also face various forms of social rejection from neighbours. They are not invited to any social events).

These types of widows are highly discriminated against both at home and in the community, as they are blamed for the death of their husbands and labelled as "unholy" or "evil" This stigmatization leads to psychological, physical and verbal abuse, especially by the in-laws. Culturally enforced isolation, such as wearing white sarees and avoiding social events, makes them outcasts. They are excluded from sacred ceremonies and festivals that are believed to bring bad luck. (Jalais). This social rejection, coupled with cultural restrictions, reinforces their marginalization and forces them to live in segregated communities, adding to their psychological distress and social isolation.

Economic impact

The tiger widows are landless, literally and marginally. Of the 10 widows, most (80%) live in the BPL category. 60% of the families have no money to pay the registration fees for the permit, so they enter the forest illegally. The husband is the sole breadwinner of the family, so after his death, all the economic burden falls on their shoulders, plunging them into unimaginable poverty. (Sahu, et. al.). In practical terms, this is an extremely difficult situation on the poverty-stricken islands, where there is no alternative employment or job opportunity for these illiterate widows. They find themselves in a helpless situation where they have to take care of their children and in this situation, due to lack of alternative sources of income, they also seek their livelihood in the jungle. Some widows have young children and this sudden financial crisis prompted them to send their children to work to ensure the survival of the family. (Pramanik). In this study, 8 out of 10 widows denied that their in-laws had any financial responsibility for the widow or her children. Few families received compensation, and most were cheated out of their insurance money by a middleman. They are usually illiterate and unskilled, so physical labour is the only way for the Tiger widows to earn money. Unfortunately, there are no job opportunities on this remote island. Thus, it is not surprising that after the death of the husband in a tiger attack, three (3%) widows of them live in the forest, which is traditionally done by men, and the other six (6%) widows make a living by selling cow dung cakes, keeping goats, chickens, pigs, ducks and cattle or grazing pigs or earning a daily wage. Only a few of them are employed as maids in some wealthy families. Tiger widows in particular are generally regarded as highly stigmatised, so that hardly anyone is willing to employ them and they somehow keep their heads above water with this kind of work.

'Amar swamike onk ager niye geche, kono kaj pain na. Amra chai ekhane kichu kaj kormo hok, amra kaj korte pari.'(My husband was taken a long time ago, and I haven't been able to find any work. We want to have some work here; we are capable of working) said 56 years old widow. Another 37 years young widow said that 'Ekjon-i income korto take niye geche. Sorkar kono sahajjo korte chana, onek koste insurance-er taka tulte perechi. Deshe to kono kaj nei. duto bacha ache tader niye amake sei jongele jete hoy. (Only one person was earning, and he was taken. The government doesn't provide any help. I struggled to withdraw insurance money. There's no work and opportunity, I have to go to the jungle with my two kids.)

The economic impact on tiger widows is severe as they are often landless, illiterate, marginalized and have limited access to financial resources. After the death of her husband, she bears the entire economic burden, which leads to extreme poverty. As there are no job opportunities on the remote islands, they turn to illegal forest work or low-paid, stigmatized jobs such as selling cow dung or working as maids. (Chen). Many widows have difficulty accessing insurance or government assistance, making them vulnerable. This economic deprivation, coupled with social stigmatization, forces them to take desperate measures to survive, often sacrificing the welfare of their children.

Mental health & Psychological impact

The stigmatisation is compounded by physical and sexual exploitation and abuse. Most of the tiger widows are traumatised and mentally disturbed and have developed certain symptoms of their mental illness. The widows have to go through the ordeal of social stigmatisation and are declared illegal trespassers in the forest as they are not allowed to conduct the burial of their husbands for fear of being identified by the forest staff. This is a very agonising ordeal for the tiger widows as in most cases, the remains of the victim can hardly be recovered. This cultural and social trauma constantly haunts her and gnaws at her physique. (Chen). Added to this is the superstition in society and the resulting ostracism that these women barely survive. Some villagers with whom the Connection dealt unhesitatingly blamed these women for their husbands' misfortunes. In addition to humiliation and discrimination, they have been placed in extreme financial hardship, with cultural stigmatisation severely affecting their health (both physical and psychological), children's health and schooling. (Yang, et. al.) They are labelled as 'unholy and evil women' by the local community 'and blamed for the death of their husband, leading to verbal, physical and psychological abuse.

A 47 years old widow said - 'Amar samne-i swamike baghe niye geche. Ekhono vable voy kore. Sei theke jangole jaina. cheleder o pathina.'(My husband was taken by a tiger right in front of me. I still feel afraid thinking about it. Since then, I haven't gone into the jungle. I don't even send my children there.) Another one told that 'Amrar swamike baghe niye jaoyar por sosur barite dhukte deni, kono kagoj potro-o deyni cheleke niye ami ekhanei chole esechi' (After my husband was taken by the tiger, they wouldn't let me enter

my in-laws' house, nor would they give any papers. With my son, I have come here.)

Tiger widows thus suffer from severe mental health problems and psychological distress due to social stigmatization, exploitation and abuse. They are blamed for the death of their husbands and ostracized by their communities, leading to feelings of isolation and trauma. This cultural and social trauma is compounded by superstition, as they are seen as 'unholy' and 'evil' and are verbally, physically and psychologically abused. The lack of support and extreme financial hardship further affect their health and well-being. (Debnath). Widows often live in constant fear and struggle with the psychological scars left by the death of their husbands and rejection by their families and communities.

Conclusion

This study shows that the stigma of tiger widows affects all aspects of their lives and condemns them to a lifetime of suffering. They are deprived of all human dignity, discriminated against by their family and community, struggling to survive in abject poverty, living a life of multiple post-traumatic scars and deprivation, abuse and exploitation. With accessibility issues compounded by vulnerability to environmental degradation, opportunities to earn a living in the Sundarban are becoming more difficult by the day. Socio-economic inequalities are exacerbated by disasters on the island, making women and children even more vulnerable. (Chakarborty, *et al*.). The stigma of tiger widows affects their entire lives and makes them more vulnerable to a lifetime of suffering. They can hardly lead a dignified life, cannot adjust with their family members and community, lead a life of abject poverty and endure a variety of trauma, humiliation, impoverishment, exploitation and degradation. In a society where widows are already stigmatized and have low social status, tiger killings have caused further suffering to widows due to the cultural stigma of tiger attack. (Chowdhury). It is strange that the government is so ambitiously marketing the Sundarban as a tourist destination while the locals are struggling with basic amenities.

The government should create different types of income sources where widows can develop their skills and increase their income. Policymakers and society need to create more opportunities to fulfil the basic needs of tigers and reintegrate them into society. Otherwise, the socio-cultural stigmatisation of tiger widows could become increasingly evident and create the conditions for them to become vulnerable to severe depression. The tiger widows in the Sundarban need to be empowered to redefine their position with dignity and justice. This should demand immediate international attention as the tiger-human conflict in Sundarban, India is increasing day by day and so is the number of tiger widows in the region. (Mukherjee). They are deprived of any human dignity and are discriminated against by their family and the local community.

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