

Believe it or not

Jambudwip – An Untold Story

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[Jambudwip has been in the headlines for quite some time. Questions involved are the livelihood of thousands of traditional fishermen and the environmental security of a very eco-sensitive area like the Sunderbans – a world heritage site. The writer, a veteran leader of the life and struggle of the traditional fishermen of the area unravels the issue. – Eds.]

What happened in Jambudwip?

Jambudwip is an isolated island in the Bay of Bengal, about 8 Kilometers to the south east of Sagar Island and almost same distance to the south west of Frazergonj, in the South 24 – Parganas District of West Bengal. Transient fishing community has been using a small part of this island from October to February every year since 1955 for fish drying as a traditional livelihood activity. The island was uninhabited and these fishermen always go back to their natal villages - mostly in the same district - at the end of the fish-drying season. Forest Department collected revenues, fees etc. and issued permits every year till 1998. Thus these fishermen have been enjoying an uninterrupted customary right on the island.

In August – September 2002 the forest department burned down the fishing implements that the transient fishers left in the island in huts – at the end of the fishing season (2001 –2002) – and debarred the fishermen from entering into the island in October 2002. According to the Forest Department this “eviction” has been done in compliance with the Supreme Court verdict of 1996 to remove all encroachments from reserved forest.

Transient fishing community of Jambudwip demanded retention of their customary right on the island. State Fisheries Ministry supported the cause of the fisher folk while the Forest Ministry stood by the action of the Forest Department. By the intervention of the Chief Minister the two Ministers and high officials had a joint meeting on August 9,2002. It was decided that,

- The fishermen will use the char area of the island from October to February for fishing activities (as usual). A joint survey will be conducted by the two Departments to identify the char area.
- All the fishermen would be issued identity cards by the Department of Fisheries and no fishermen without identity cards will be allowed to approach the island.
- Fishermen will not be allowed to make any permanent structures.
- Fencing of the area (used by the fishermen) would be done with the funds from the Fisheries Department.
- A case to be made out to the Central Empowered Committee constituted by the Supreme Court to accommodate the requirements of the (transient) fishermen on a continuing basis.

Chief Minister approved the decisions and as a follow-up Fisheries Minister and Deputy Minister of Forest visited the island on 23rd Oct. 2002. Forest Department did not allow the fishermen to land up in the island. Chief Minister instructed on 24th Oct. to allow fishing from 27th October. Forest Department again declined to allow fishers to go to the island.

On 25th October The Statesman reported the details of Forest Department's tourism project in Jambu Island and their decision to open up the island to domestic and foreign tourists from January 2003. Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for a Rs. 700 crore 'eco-tourism project' in Sagar, Fraserganj, L-plot, Koikhali, Jharkhali and *other islands* (emphasis ours) of Sunderbans was signed between the Government of West Bengal and SAHARA INDIA on 30th Oct. 2002. A total of 750 acres of land would be provided for the project. The project proposes boating, rafting, surfing, rowing, diving, creek excursion and other water sports in the area. Five star hotels, floatels, beach-resorts, etc. are also part of the project. The first four among the above named islands are in the vicinity of Jambudwip.

Chief Minister authorised Health and Panchayat Minister Shri Surya Kanta Mishra to visit Jambudwip together with the Fisheries and Forest Ministers to settle the issue. The mouth of the Jambudwip creek was blocked with RCC pillars by the forest department obviously to shut down the scope of harbouring of the fishing boats in the island. Shri Mishra visited the island on 7th November 2002. He was visibly disturbed to see these constructions blocking the creek and violating the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) notification.

At this time, to stall the implementation of the decisions made by the Ministers, some environment NGOs went to the Central Empowered Committee (CEC) for intervention. The CEC first wrote to the Chief Secretary of West Bengal to report on the progress of eviction and soon after conveyed their decision to visit Jambudwip immediately.

Ten fishermen died as their fishing boats drowned during the cyclone on 12th November after being denied shelter and driven by the forest personnel in Jambudwip. Fishermen started dharna and continued to sit in their boats, first near shore and subsequently in the creek of Jambudwip from 21st November 2002. CEC visited Jambudwip on 3rd December and had a very brief meeting with fishermen leaders on 4th December. Parliamentary Standing Committee on Science & Technology, Environment and Forest visited the island on 22nd December. After a continuous dharna for 32 days the fishermen landed in the island during the visit of the Standing Committee. Since then they have resumed fish drying activity in the island in an effort to try their fortune for the remaining few weeks of the season. But they may not be allowed to come there in the next season unless it is regularized in a proper manner.

There had been a systematic propaganda maligning the transient fishing community of Jambudwip to pave the way of eviction without adverse public opinion. Some examples are as follows:

Propaganda:

1. These fishermen come from Bangladesh every year during the winter and plunder our fishery resources and smuggle the products (dry fish) to Bangladesh.
2. Jambudwip is very close (contiguous!) to the Indo-Bangladesh border and it is the 'unofficial gateway to India' for illegal migrants coming from Bangladesh.
3. These aliens use Jambudwip for 'all types of illegal activities under the cover of fish drying business' including smuggling contraband items such as drugs, firearms etc.
4. Jambudwip fishermen use trawlers for fishing. Foreign trawlers (mainly Thai) also come to Jambudwip for poaching and smuggling and piracy.
5. This 'business' in Jambudwip started in the eighties.
6. Olive Ridley turtles come to this island for nesting but fishermen collect their eggs, destroy the nests and thus create further threat to the survival of these endangered species.
7. Fishermen built huge concrete 'godowns' in the island as warehouses of smuggling.
8. Some of these fishermen built houses and permanently settled in the island since late 1980s.
9. The island is very remote and difficult to reach and hence it is not possible to keep vigilance on illegal and anti-national activities.

Reality:

1. These fishermen are mostly permanent residents of South 24-Parganas (mainly Kakdwip, Namkhana, Sagar, Pathar Pratima), Midnapur and other neighboring districts of West Bengal. There are a few persons from Bihar too (East Bengal refugee fishermen rehabilitated in Bihar in the 1950s). The male members of the community come and stay in Jambudwip for transient fishing (October to February) while rest of the family remains in their permanent natal villages. Their produce (dry fish and fishmeal) goes mainly to the two major whole sale markets of Uluberia (Howrah district) and Sheoraphuli (Hoogli district) as because most of these transient fishing groups take advances (dadan) from the whole sellers. The state Police, Border Security Force, Coast Guard and Customs have not reported any case of smuggling out the fish produce to Bangladesh.
2. Jambudwip is the farthest among all islands of Sunderbans from the Indo- Bangladesh border. It is more than 90 Kilometers (to the west) inside the country from the international boundary. What the fishermen working at Jambudwip may have to do with illegal immigrants with all the security personnel around?
3. There is not even one example of arrest or apprehension or interception or recovery of any such item till date to substantiate these allegations.
4. There is not even a single trawler (vessels using trawl or drag net) operating from Jambudwip. Only fixed bag nets i.e. stake nets (*locally known as Behundi Jaal or Bindi Jaal*) are used in this fishing. In Jambudwip today each unit of transient fishers use mechanized boats, motorized boats and non-motorized boats. Motorized and non-motorized boats remain almost all the times in the fishing grounds – far off – while the mechanized boats keep on plying between the base and the fishing grounds in the deep sea, twice daily, carrying provisions for the fishing crew and bringing back the catch.

The Thai trawlers cannot approach Jambudwip for the shallow waters in the region. No piracy in the Jambudwip region has yet been reported.

5. Transient fishermen are pursuing this livelihood in Jambudwip since 1955. This has been documented in details by a study conducted by Anthropological Survey of India in 1966-67. [**THE MOON AND NET – Study of a transient community of fishermen at Jambudwip.** Bikash Raychaudhuri. Published by Anthropological Survey of India,

Government of India.] Forest Department collected revenue and issued permits every year till 1998. Dr. Bikash Raychaudhuri also recorded this in his study.

6. There is no record of Olive Ridley turtles nesting in Jambudwip. Dr. Bikash Raychaudhuri lived with the fishermen in the island in 1966 and 1967 fishing seasons but did not see any turtle nesting there. Prof Amallesh Chawdhury, an eminent Marine Biologist has been visiting Jambudwip for more than three decades. He also did not find any turtle nesting in Jambudwip. The fishermen are astonished hear the claim.
7. There were about 40 stores – each one at the site of each fish-drying unit. These are thatch-roofed huts standing on bamboo poles or wooden poles with reeds fencing on all the four sides. Average area of these huts is 15feet X 60feet. Used bamboo, nets, hand trolleys, spades, barrels, crates, reed mats, manglers, choir ropes, baskets and other implements are stored in these huts at the end of each fishing for use in the next season. Forest personnel burnt all these to ashes in August – September 2002.
8. There were 109 families living permanently in the northern side of Janbudwip. These settlements started in the 1980s. They were migrants mainly from Sagar Island. Panchayat authorities have sunk tube-well for these people a few years back. These 109 families have been evicted in September 2002 and rehabilitated in Sagar Island. **These settlements are deliberately mixed up with the transient fishers. Transient fishing community never ever attempted any permanent settlement in Jambudwip.**
9. Jambudwip, although an offshore island, is one of the most easily accessible places in the Sundarban region. It is a four hours' bus ride from Esplanade to Fraserganj via Namkhana. There are direct buses from Kolkata to Fraserganj. From Fraserganj fishing harbour it is only half an hours' cruise by ordinary motor boats (Bhutbhuti). From the Namkhana Police station it takes one and half-hour at the most to reach Jambudwip by bhutbhuties. From Sagar Island it is nearer. Jambudwip is one of the nearest islands from the Coast Guard base of Haldia. The faster crafts of the Coast Guard take half an hour to reach Jambudwip from Haldia. Many places in the Sundarbans and other areas are far more remote and difficult. Is evacuation of the people or shutting down their livelihood is the only way to check probable illegal activities?

We need to protect our nation, our society, our culture and heritage, our land, water and forests for the present and future generations of the people. The traditional fishermen with their benign fishing gears are dependent on the upkeep of the marine flora and fauna. This is why we fight against indiscriminate trawl fishing by big business. This is why we worship mangroves.

The irony is that some armchair environmentalists miss this indelible link between natural resources and traditional people on the one hand and the threats associated with glittering mega projects on the other.

[DISHA printed and circulated this article in support of evicted fishworkers of Jambudwip through its quarterly 'Environment Newsletter']