

Report on 8 – 9 February Meeting

An Extended General Meeting has been taken place on Saturday & Sunday, February 8 & 9, 2025, in Canning. Venue – Pather Sathi Canning - Canning Town, Near Canning Railway Station, South 24 Parganas, West Bengal. This crucial gathering acted as a platform to deliberate on significant issues affecting our communities, with a special focus on the unique challenges faced in the Sundarbans region.

1. Forest Rights Act, 2006: In-depth discussions will be held to devise strategies and make decisions regarding the effective implementation of this landmark legislation in the Sundarbans. Emphasis will be placed on ensuring that the Act benefits the local population while aligning with the ecological sensitivities of the region.
2. Challenges of Water and Forest-Dependent People: The meeting will also address the pressing concerns of people engaged in occupations reliant on water and forest resources within the Sundarbans. Efforts will be made to understand their struggles and explore actionable solutions to improve their livelihoods and working conditions.

The meeting was convened by Pabitra Mandal, Convener, West Bengal Jana Shramajibi Manch, Secretary, Sundarban Jana Shramajibi Mancha and Organized by: Sundarban Jana Shramajibi Mancha. Around 50 participants, actively participated who are mainly community leaders from different blocks like Kultali, Gosaba, Canning, Hingalgunj of North and South 24 Parganas. Along with these community leaders, there glorious presence of Shambhu Saha, Secretary, Sundarban Matsyajibi Raksha Committee, Gobinda Das, Jt Secretary, Sundarban Matsyabibi Joutha Sangram Samiti, Jayanta Basu, Renowned Journalist and Sundarban Specialist, Subhash Chandra Acharyya, Ex Jt Director, Sundarban Development Board under Sundarban Affairs Department, Govt of West Bengal.

Resolution – First Part

Organize Participatory Learning Exercises locally with the questionnaire, with the forest and water dependent communities. (Questionnaire Draft attached)

The Location of the PLE will be as follows:

In the Sundarbans region, some blocks are closely linked with forest areas due to their geographical proximity to the Sundarbans Reserve Forest (SRF) and Sundarbans Tiger Reserve (STR). These blocks have significant forest-dependent populations engaged in fishing, honey collection, crab collection, and minor forest produce gathering.

Blocks Closely Linked with Forest Areas

North 24 Parganas District:

1. Sandeshkhali-I
2. Sandeshkhali-II
3. Hingalganj
4. Minakhan

South 24 Parganas District:

5. Gosaba – The most significant block, home to forest villages near the core of the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve.
6. Basanti – Adjacent to the forest, with a large number of forest-dependent people.
7. Kultali – Located near dense mangrove forests, with high dependence on forest-based livelihoods.
8. Patharpratima – Close to the southern edge of the Sundarbans, with fishing and minor forest produce collection.
9. Namkhana – Coastal block, linked to estuarine mangrove regions.
10. Sagar – Partially forested, with strong links to mangrove areas.
11. Kakdwip – Has connections to forested riverine areas but is more focused on fisheries.

Key Features of These Blocks

- High Forest Dependence: Many local residents, including Mouals (honey collectors) and Bawalis (wood collectors), depend on the forest for livelihoods.
- Presence of Wildlife Risks: These blocks experience human-wildlife conflicts, particularly tiger and crocodile attacks.
- Restricted Access to Forests: Due to the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve, many of these areas have strict regulations on entry and collection of resources.

Resolution – Second Part

Finalization of Policy Advocacy Document, Finalization of Press Release Document after conducting and recoding the local level meetings.

Meeting with Local Elected Representatives and Legislative Members of State and Central Levels.

Resolution – Third Part

Next meeting will be conducted after completion of First and Second Part, preferably in March 2025.

The following NOTES are written from the speeches delivered by the participants in the meeting. These notes are written and not edited, but only kept as RAW MATERIALS of the participants' aspirations.

It is very important to implement the Forest Rights Act 2006 to protect the livelihoods of the Sundarbans area that depend on water and forests.

1. The government must ensure the lives and livelihoods of people who depend on forest water.
 2. "Wherever there is water, there is a fisher" whether it is a core area or a buffer. The right to collect fish, crabs, and honey must be given everywhere.
 3. Inhumane torture (beating) of the fishing community dependent on forest water, withdrawal of nets, permits, drinking water and ice, and throwing collected fish into the water should be stopped. In addition, the collection of fines should be stopped.
 4. Efforts to exploit fishermen by keeping their nets and permits for long periods of time and wasting their fishing time must be stopped.
 5. Fishermen should be allowed to use different types of nets, especially gillnets, hooks, and lines, as allowed by fishery department, as their main tools. Nets approved by the Fisheries Department should be kept in operation.
 6. To increase the reproduction of aquatic animals including fish and crabs, the rivers of the Sundarbans must be immediately included in the Ganga Action Plan and the livelihood of people dependent on the river must be ensured.
 7. All blocked channels, creeks must be repaired.
 8. If local creeks, rivers are renovated, the pressure on the ecosystem deep in the Sundarbans will decrease, and the pressure on fishermen will decrease.
 9. To protect the Sundarbans, noise pollution, including the creation of concrete jungles inside the forest, must be stopped.
 10. Legal action must be taken against the destruction of mangroves.
 11. Like the Fisheries Department, saltwater fish should be bred and the fingerlings are to be released into the river or sea.
 12. The government should take responsibility for protecting public life by constructing 15-20 feet high and 30-40 feet wide river embankments or concrete dams to prevent floods.
 13. After the change of the water boundary between India and Bangladesh, no boundary has been drawn. As a result, BDR is detaining and torturing our fishermen in the name of violating international boundaries. Therefore, the boundary must be marked.
- Besides, currently BSF is forcibly taking away fishermen who catch small fish and crabs, which has never happened before. Therefore, the atrocities of BSF must be stopped.

14. Trawl fishing is supposed to be done outside 12 nautical miles. But as they are looting the fish of small fishermen inside the Sundarbans, the fishermen have not been getting any fish for the last 3 months. Therefore, trawl fishing must be stopped in the Sundarbans immediately.
15. Allowance to be given in Ban time duration.
16. Insurance and Compensation - Its area/boundaries must be specified.
17. Fishermen should be allowed to use Machine Boats for safety.

The following NOTES are written from the speeches delivered by the participants in the meeting. These notes are written and not edited, but only kept as RAW MATERIALS of the participants' aspirations.

Issues Raised in the Meeting – 8-9 February, 2025, at Canning – 1st part

1. Documenting the Struggles of Traditional Fishermen: It is imperative to collect and present concrete evidence of the challenges faced by small-scale traditional fishers, crab harvesters, and honey collectors.
2. Depleting Marine Resources in the Matla River: Once a vital lifeline, the Matla River is now obstructed from all sides, leading to the rapid depletion of fish, shrimp, and crab populations. This ecological imbalance has forced dependent communities to migrate southward into core forest areas, exacerbating the crisis.
3. Challenges with Boat License Certificates (BLCs) and Legal Documentation: The process of issuing, renewing, and validating BLCs is fraught with delays and rejections, often extending beyond the fishing season. Fishermen also face on-site harassment and mistreatment by forest officials, further impeding their ability to sustain their livelihoods.
4. Direct Representation of Fishermen in Policy Discussions: Fishermen must be given the opportunity to articulate their concerns and grievances directly in official meetings and consultations.
5. Recognition of Traditional Fishing Rights: The fundamental principle that "where there is water, there are fishermen" is being ignored by forest officers in the Sundarbans. Their failure to acknowledge this reality is endangering the livelihoods of thousands.
6. Expansion of Core Area – A Cause for Declining Catch: The continuous expansion of core forest areas is leading to a significant reduction in accessible fishing zones, resulting in declining fish capture rates and economic distress.
7. Tourism's Adverse Environmental Impact: Unregulated tourism is causing severe ecological damage, particularly due to the indiscriminate disposal of non-biodegradable waste, including plastics, into the fragile Sundarbans ecosystem.
8. Delayed and Inadequate Compensation for Tiger Attack Victims: Victims of tiger attacks are not receiving their rightful compensation on time or in full, leaving affected families in financial distress.

9. Lack of Local Knowledge Among Forest Officials: Officers posted from outside the region often lack essential knowledge about Sundarbans fisheries, crab species, and seasonal variations, leading to flawed policy enforcement.
10. Disputes Over Fishing Net Regulations: The imposition of arbitrary restrictions on fishing nets without clear guidelines has caused confusion and hardship among the fishing community.
11. Contradictions in Mobile Phone Usage Policy: The Forest Authority prohibits the use of mobile phones in core areas, preventing fishermen from accessing crucial weather forecasts. However, disaster management authorities mandate mobile phone use for weather alerts, creating a contradictory and dangerous situation.
12. Eviction from Creeks During Storms: During storms, fishermen seek refuge in core-area creeks for safety. However, the Forest Department pressures them to return home, threatening legal action and fines, jeopardizing their survival.
13. Lack of a Communication Channel for Fishermen's Issues: There is no regular medium to address fishermen's grievances, report tiger attack cases, or disseminate updates on compensation packages.
14. Unclear Definitions in FRA 2006 Regarding Sundarbans: The Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006 does not specify how the distance between residences and forested areas in the Sundarbans should be calculated, leading to confusion in implementation.
15. Defining Forest Boundaries and Access Rights: The criteria for designating an area as a forest, along with clear demarcations of permissible and restricted zones, must be clarified and legally documented.
16. Involvement of Professional Trade Organizations: When organizations like SJSM or WBJSM engage in advocacy, they should collaborate with professional trade-based associations to strengthen their initiatives.
17. Beehive Experiments for Safe Honey Collection: The installation of bee boxes on boats and within designated forest zones could enhance honey production, ensuring higher quality, greater yield, and safer collection practices.
18. Social Security for the Vulnerable: Priority should be given to those affected by wildlife attacks, particularly widows, under social security schemes such as Old Age Allowance and Awas Yojana.
19. Comprehensive Social Security for Fishermen and Crab Collectors: Those engaged in fishing and crab harvesting must be provided with full social security benefits, considering the hazardous nature of their work.

20. Failure of Water Tank Distribution System: Saltwater and freshwater storage tanks provided for distribution are often ineffective due to improper timing and handling, leading to significant wastage.
21. Mandating Gram Sabha Formation Under FRA 2006: The government must issue explicit directives to constitute Gram Sabhas as mandated under FRA 2006, ensuring that local governance structures are in place.
22. Renaming Canning Station to Matla Station: The colonial legacy of naming locations after British administrators must be rejected. Matla River, which has shaped the history and livelihoods of the region, should be honored by renaming Canning Station to Matla Station, reflecting indigenous identity and historical continuity.
23. Ensuring River and Monsoon Water for Sustainability: The survival of Sundarbans communities depends on two critical resources: river embankments and monsoon-fed freshwater. Access to these must be secured for every household.
24. Formation of a Multi-Stakeholder Committee: A specialized committee comprising government officials, relevant department representatives, experts, and fishermen should be established to address and resolve ongoing issues effectively.

Issues Raised in the Meeting – 8-9 February, 2025, at Canning – 2nd part

The implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006 is crucial to safeguarding the livelihoods of the communities in the Sundarbans, who are intrinsically dependent on water and forests.

Immediate action is required to ensure their survival and economic stability.

1. Protection of Livelihoods: The government must take immediate and concrete measures to protect the lives and livelihoods of those who rely on forest and water resources for their sustenance.
2. Recognition of Fishing Rights in All Areas: The fundamental truth that "Wherever there is water, there is a fisher" must be acknowledged. Fishing, crab collection, and honey gathering should be permitted across all areas, including both core and buffer zones.
3. End to Inhumane Treatment: The physical abuse, confiscation of nets and permits, denial of access to drinking water and ice, and the deliberate destruction of collected fish by throwing them back into the water must be stopped. Additionally, the arbitrary collection of fines from fishermen should be abolished.
4. Timely Issuance of Permits and Nets: The deliberate delay in returning confiscated nets and issuing fishing permits, which results in loss of valuable fishing time and economic hardship, must end immediately.

5. Use of Approved Fishing Nets: Fishermen should have the right to use gillnets, hooks, and lines, as approved by the Fisheries Department, without interference. All legally sanctioned nets must be permitted for use.
6. Inclusion of Sundarbans Rivers in the Ganga Action Plan: To restore aquatic biodiversity and ensure the reproductive health of fish and crab populations, the rivers of the Sundarbans must be urgently integrated into the Ganga Action Plan.
7. Restoration of Blocked Waterways: All obstructed channels and creeks must be repaired and reopened to facilitate the free movement of aquatic species and traditional fishing activities.
8. Renovation of Local Waterways: By restoring local creeks and rivers, the pressure on deep Sundarbans ecosystems will be reduced, benefiting both the environment and the fishing communities.
9. Control of Environmental Degradation: To preserve the fragile ecosystem of the Sundarbans, noise pollution and the unchecked expansion of concrete structures within the forest must be strictly prohibited.
10. Strict Legal Action Against Mangrove Destruction: Mangroves are the lifeline of the Sundarbans and their destruction must be met with severe legal consequences to ensure the sustainability of the region.
11. Saltwater Fish Conservation and Hatchery Expansion: Similar to Fisheries Department initiatives, saltwater fish species must be bred in hatcheries, with fingerlings released into rivers and the sea to boost fish populations.
12. Construction of Protective River Embankments: The government must take responsibility for public safety by building embankments or concrete dams measuring 15-20 feet high and 30-40 feet wide to mitigate flood-related disasters.
13. Marking of Water Boundaries Between India and Bangladesh: Since the alteration of the water boundary, no official demarcation has been established, leading to repeated detainment and torture of Indian fishermen by the BDR under the pretext of boundary violations. This must be addressed immediately. Additionally, the BSF has begun forcibly taking away small fishermen and crab collectors, a practice that has never occurred before. These injustices must cease immediately.
14. Immediate Ban on Trawl Fishing in the Sundarbans: Trawl fishing is only permitted outside 12 nautical miles, but these trawlers continue to exploit fish resources within the Sundarbans, depriving small fishermen of their catch for months. This must be stopped immediately.
15. Allowance During Ban Period: Fishermen must be provided with financial support during the ban period when fishing activities are restricted.

16. Clear Definition of Insurance and Compensation Boundaries: The geographical boundaries for insurance and compensation claims must be clearly defined to ensure fair and timely assistance for affected fishermen.
17. Permission to Use Machine Boats for Safety: Given the hostile environment and growing risks, fishermen should be allowed to use machine-powered boats to enhance their safety and efficiency in deep waters.