

**The Tide That Takes —  
Wildlife Conflict and Victim Families  
in the Sundarbans  
*Rights, Accountability, and Field Action*  
(Narrative Nonfiction in Activist Documentation Style)**

**Prologue: The boat returns without its shadow**

The Sundarbans teaches its people to read what is missing.

A boat that should carry three men comes back with two. A bamboo pole lies across the bow like a broken arm. A net, rolled too neatly, suggests someone stopped work suddenly. The river is quiet. The forest is quieter. A wife stands on the embankment and looks at the returning boat as if it is a witness that refuses to speak.

In the Sundarbans, death is sometimes an event. But grief is always a process and the process has two predators. The first is the tiger or the crocodile. The second is the system: the file, the form, the delayed signature, the suspicious question, the invisible boundary, the permit that determines whether a life counts as a life or a “violation.”

This article is written to expose that second predator, administrative abandonment and to build a practical, field-ready path forward: recognition, compensation, counselling, livelihood rebuilding, and prevention. It is also a historical record: the conflict is not incidental. It is structural.

**1. The Sundarbans: a world heritage landscape, a worksite, a frontier of risk**

The Sundarbans is globally celebrated — mangroves, mudflats, dolphins, birds, and tigers that swim across creeks as naturally as they walk. Internationally it is recognized as a World Heritage landscape; India’s Sundarbans National Park was inscribed in 1987, and global heritage documentation describes the Sundarbans as a biologically exceptional ecosystem shaped by river and tide.<sup>12</sup>

But heritage is not only ecology. Heritage is also responsibility. The people who live on the forest fringe pay the price of living next to a protected landscape that the world values. Their lives are shaped by a daily arithmetic:

- **How much fish today?**
- **How much debt pending?**
- **Which creek is safe at this tide?**
- **Who will carry the permit?**
- **If something happens, will the family be believed?**

In the Sundarbans, “human–wildlife conflict” is not merely wildlife entering villages. It is also people entering danger because survival pushes them there. This is why conflict must be treated as **a livelihood and rights issue**, not only a conservation issue.

## **2. Chronology: when conservation boundaries hardened and victimhood became conditional**

To understand victim families, we must understand how the landscape was re-governed.

### **2.1 The turning points**

The conservation era altered not only management but also the moral language of death. After Project Tiger (1973), protected-area governance intensified.<sup>3</sup> Over subsequent years, protected statuses and zoning (core, buffer, reserve forest management) became central to how entry, work, and “legality” were understood.

This transition produced an unintended but devastating outcome:

**the same system that protects wildlife can be used to deny justice to human victims** – by framing their deaths as the result of “illegal entry” rather than as tragedies of livelihood exposure.

### **2.2 When the forest becomes a courtroom**

In cities, a workplace accident is investigated as an accident. In the Sundarbans, a forest death is often investigated as a crime against rules. The family is asked to prove not only *what happened* but also *whether the dead deserved relief*.

That is the beginning of the “paperwork war.”

## **3. The tiger’s history: numbers that hide thousands of broken households**

The Sundarbans tiger is not only an animal. It is an institution. It shapes policy, media, myth, and fear. And it is a direct presence in labour.

A major documentation source reports that between 1985 and 2008, **789 people were attacked by tigers** and **666 died** in the Sundarbans; it also notes hundreds of tiger straying incidents into fringe villages.<sup>4</sup> These figures do not merely show conflict—they show a long, continuous social wound.

### **3.1 The occupational pattern**

The victims are not randomly distributed across society. They are workers:

- fishers and crab collectors,
- honey collectors and forest-produce workers,
- boat workers and labourers operating at creek margins.

It is a class profile of conflict. In activist terms:

**Sundarbans conflict is a poverty tax.**

### **3.2 Two arenas of tiger conflict**

Tiger conflict appears in two interlinked arenas:

#### **A) Forest-interior conflict (livelihood risk):**

When workers enter mangroves, tigers attack with the advantage of terrain. Many incidents end with a missing body, an administrative nightmare that later blocks compensation.

#### **B) Village-edge conflict (straying and panic):**

When tigers enter settlements, panic and retaliation rise. Community safety becomes fragile. People demand barriers, response teams, and quick action.

Mitigation tools have ranged from local innovations to structural interventions. Some practices, like deterrent techniques associated with Sundarbans field knowledge have been discussed widely in broader Indian conflict contexts.<sup>5</sup> More structural measures, such as boundary fencing or nets, have been reported as reducing certain kinds of straying when properly maintained and monitored.<sup>6</sup>

But mitigation must not become performance. A fence that looks good in a photograph but fails at high tide is not mitigation — it is neglect.

### **4. The crocodile's conflict: violence at the most ordinary moment**

Crocodile conflict rarely receives the same attention as tiger conflict. That is partly because crocodile attacks often occur during ordinary acts: washing, crossing, anchoring, stepping into water to pull a net. There is no dramatic forest interior, only the intimate edge where livelihood meets water.

A peer-reviewed study analyzing estuarine crocodile conflict in the Indian Sundarbans documented **127 attacks between 2000 and 2013**, mapped across villages and blocks, with seasonal patterns linked to human activity near water.<sup>7</sup>

Crocodile attacks produce a distinct aftermath: many victims survive with severe injuries and permanent disability. The household becomes a long-term care system: medical debts, lost labour capacity, and a wife or daughter absorbing caregiving and income replacement at once. In this sense, crocodile conflict is often **a slow disaster**—a continuing injury rather than a single death.

### **5. The victim family after the incident: five layers of harm**

A wildlife incident breaks a family in more than one dimension. A rights-based response must recognize all layers.

#### **5.1 Economic collapse**

The primary earner is lost—or injured beyond work. Debt expands. Families sell livestock, tools, even fishing nets. Children become “available labour.”

## **5.2 Administrative struggle**

Relief requires evidence. Evidence requires documents. Documents require access to offices, time, and literacy. Bodies are often missing; death proofs become contested; the family is trapped.

## **5.3 Social stigma**

This is the Sundarbans' most cruel inheritance: grief becomes blame.

## **5.4 Psychological trauma**

Fear becomes permanent. Sleep becomes fragile. Isolation becomes normal.

## **5.5 Return to risk**

When support fails, families return to the same dangerous livelihood. The cycle repeats. This is why a one-time cheque cannot be called “rehabilitation.”

## **6. Tiger widows: stigma as the second predator**

In the Sundarbans, the widow of a tiger victim is often treated not as a bereaved citizen but as a social threat, “unlucky,” “marked,” blamed for what she could not control.

A documented mental health study on tiger widows describes stigma, discrimination, deprivation, and social rejection tied to tiger killing and local cultural narratives.<sup>8</sup> Public scholarships and reporting also describe how belief and folk culture can create an ostracized category of women—turning widowhood into a sentence.<sup>9</sup>

Across the border, journalism from Bangladesh's Sundarbans similarly describes widows being labelled and excluded, highlighting that stigma is not a local oddity but a regional pattern in this mangrove world.<sup>10</sup>

### **6.1 What stigma does (practically)**

- Women are discouraged from markets and public events.
- Their participation in SHGs and collective work is undermined.
- Children inherit shame and economic fragility.
- Families avoid reporting incidents to prevent harassment or “bad name.”

In activist language:

### **stigma is governance failure in disguise.**

Where the state does not guarantee protection and dignity, society produces informal punishment.

## **7. Compensation and recognition: the battle to make a dead man count**

A justice system is tested not by what it promises but by how it treats the most vulnerable.

### **7.1 The national benchmark: ₹10 lakh for death**

India's environment ministry communication (via PIB) reported enhancement of ex-gratia under centrally sponsored wildlife schemes, listing **₹10 lakh for death/permanent incapacitation** and specified amounts for injuries.<sup>11</sup>

## **7.2 The Supreme Court signal: treat it like disaster, pay uniformly**

News reports in November 2025 stated the Supreme Court directed states to consider classifying human-wildlife conflict as a "natural disaster" and mandated **₹10 lakh ex-gratia** for each human death due to wildlife.<sup>1213</sup>

This framing matters. If human – wildlife conflict is treated like a disaster, response systems must be faster, clearer, and non-discretionary.

## **7.3 The Sundarbans "core area" trap and the High Court response**

A landmark Calcutta High Court order directed compensation (reported as **₹5 lakh each**) to two widows whose husbands were killed by tigers in the Sundarbans core area, criticizing denial based on illegal entry as "grossly disproportionate."<sup>1415</sup>

This is not only about money. It is about recognition: **a working man's death cannot be erased by boundary technicalities**, especially where livelihood dependence makes boundaries practically unavoidable.

## **8. The field action model: what support must look like (not charity – rehabilitation)**

A rights-based response must be a system, not a gesture. The most workable model has **three pillars**.

### **Pillar A: Counselling and psychosocial first aid (PSFA)**

Counselling is not a luxury. It is prevention. It blocks stigma. It keeps families connected.

#### **72-hour protocol**

- A trained local worker/SHG leader visits the family.
- Stabilizes immediate needs: food, childcare, travel, reporting.
- Creates a safe space to speak without interrogation.
- Mobilizes a public message: the widow is not guilty; the community stands with her.

#### **30-day protocol**

- Widow peer circles (monthly), grief support, safety planning.
- Referral for severe symptoms (depression/PTSD - post-traumatic stress development markers).

This approach aligns with the documented link between stigma and psychosocial harm among tiger widows.<sup>8</sup>

### **Pillar B: Financial stabilisation (staged support)**

A single payment often disappears into debt. Staged support prevents collapse.

1. **Emergency grant** (immediate needs)
2. **Bridge support** (3–6 months of minimum income/ration)
3. **Ex-gratia compensation** (time-bound, transparent)
4. **Debt mediation** (prevent predatory lending spirals)

### **Pillar C: Livelihood rebuilding (safe, local, market-linked)**

Livelihood must reduce forest dependence, especially for widows.

#### **Skill pathways**

- tailoring and uniform stitching
- food processing (pickles, snacks, packaging)
- poultry/duck rearing where feasible
- SHG micro-enterprises with bookkeeping and market linkage

Civil society models in the Sundarbans have demonstrated livelihood training and support-centre approaches for tiger widows and victim families.<sup>16</sup>

### **9. The paperwork war: a practical pathway that protects dignity**

A system that demands paperwork without providing support is not governance. It is punishment.

#### **9.1 Build a “Victim Family File” from Day 1**

A physical file with copies matters more than hope.

##### **Minimum file contents**

- IDs of deceased and claimant
- relationship proof (widow/heir)
- incident note: date/time/location/witness list/boat details
- copies of all submitted applications with receipts
- medical or inquest papers (where available)
- bank details for transfers

**Field rule:** never submit without an acknowledgement copy.

#### **9.2 The missing-body reality: humane recognition must exist**

The Sundarbans often returns no body. A humane system must recognize death through:

- witness statements,
- forest verification,
- last-seen documentation.

If the state refuses missing-body recognition, it pushes families into silence and despair, and it ruins data integrity for the whole conflict landscape.

#### **9.3 Escalation ladder when officials delay**

1. written status request

2. escalation to higher office with full copies
3. panchayat certification and public accountability pressure
4. NGO paralegal accompaniment
5. legal remedy (courts have intervened in unjust denial contexts)<sup>1415</sup>

## **10. Prevention: safe zones, permits, emergency measures**

Prevention is not a lecture. It is infrastructure + literacy + response.

### **10.1 Permit literacy: make legality usable**

The official Sundarban Tiger Reserve site lists entry permission points including the Field Director's office at **Canning** and locations such as Sonakhali, Bagna, and Sajnekhali.<sup>17</sup> A West Bengal forest portal provides related public-facing information on Sundarbans NP/STR and permissions.<sup>18</sup>

#### **Activist argument:**

A confusing or inaccessible permit system pushes workers into informal entry. Later, "illegal entry" becomes the excuse to deny compensation. Permit literacy camps, seasonal briefings, and facilitation desks are prevention tools.

### **10.2 Risk maps: local geography of danger**

Communities should build practical, seasonal risk maps:

- high-risk creeks and bends
- safer ghats and crossing points
- crocodile seasonal risk awareness (winter/early monsoon peaks per research)<sup>7</sup>
- buddy systems and emergency contact chains

### **10.3 Emergency response architecture**

Minimum requirements:

- first responders trained in bleeding control and safe evacuation
- pre-identified transport routes (boat + road)
- communication chain linking forest outposts, health centres, panchayat
- post-incident Family Support Desk (counselling + documents)

## **11. Government and NGOs: an accountability map**

A conflict landscape needs two engines: the state's duty and civil society's last-mile power.

### **11.1 Government duties (non-negotiable)**

- time-bound relief aligned with national benchmarks and legal directions<sup>1112</sup>
- non-harassment reporting protocols
- transparent SOPs (including missing-body pathways)
- interface risk reduction (safe ghats, warning systems, barriers where effective)

- livelihood alternatives linked to SHGs and skills ecosystems

### **11.2 NGO and community organisation duties (power-building)**

- paralegal accompaniment and claim follow-up
- counselling and stigma interruption
- livelihood training and market linkage
- collective organisation so widows are not isolated

Documented civil society initiatives and support-centre models provide examples of these directions.<sup>16</sup>

### **Epilogue: Justice is a conservation strategy**

The Sundarbans cannot be protected by fear alone. Conservation will not endure on the backs of people who are left to die, then left to beg, then left to be shamed.

A rights-based response is not anti-conservation. It is coexistence made real.

If compensation is delayed, families return to risk. If stigma is unchallenged, widows become invisible. If permits are inaccessible, legality becomes a trap. If emergency systems fail, deaths multiply. But if the state guarantees fast relief and dignity, if NGOs organise support and legal literacy, if communities build risk maps and response teams—then coexistence becomes possible.

In the Sundarbans, the tiger and the crocodile are part of the ecosystem. Administrative abandonment should not be.

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### **Further Reading (Short, high-value)**

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**Pabitra Mandal – “The voice of the Sundarbans, a pioneer of rights and ecological justice.”**

*Rising from the tidal villages of Gosaba, Pabitra Mandal is the founder and current Secretary of the Sundarban Jana Sramajibi Mancha. He has worked tirelessly on the implementation of FRA 2006, defending the rights of*

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