
Bangladesh: The Sundarbans under siege by megatourism

A project earmarked for the biodiversity rich Sundarbans is being firmly opposed by environmentalists and local population, who fear that it will harm the world's biggest mangrove forests.

The Lucknow-based Sahara group, in partnership with the state, is setting up an enormous and controversial 'eco-tourism' project in the Sundarbans, which experts warn would do the ecologically fragile region more harm than good.

The Sahara India Tourism Development Corporation, a joint venture with the West Bengal Tourism Development Corporation, proposes to set up four land-based and three floating facilities mainly to draw the high-end domestic and foreign tourists to the Sundarbans. While the land-based complexes with air-conditioned cottages will come up on four islands — Sagar, Frazerganj, -Plot and Kaikhali — the five-star floating hotels will be berthed in three creeks, one of them near the confluence of the Muriganga and Hooghly rivers. The company plans to take 1,500 tourists a day by catamaran to the Sundarbans on a four-day package from Prinsep Ghat in Calcutta. The company promises to spend four to five per cent of its revenue from the project on social development of the region every year. "No company has done this before," says Romi Datta, head of the project.

Not everybody, however, is convinced that the project will, as Sahara claims, actually end up enriching the environment. The delta is the gateway to the Hooghly-Brahmaputra basin. "Any major human interference like the floating facilities would affect not only the tidal and salinity balance, but the hydrology of the entire basin," Sinha says. This means more silt and less flow in the Hooghly, further clogging Calcutta's drainage system. "Getting fish like hilsa would be a problem if the flow of water in the Hooghly reduces further," Sinha says. "It's absurd to have a project like this in the Sundarbans. The Sahara project will harm, not help West Bengal," Bittu Sahgal, a well-known environmentalist and editor of Sanctuary Magazine, says.

More than 3.5 million people live in 54 of the 108 islands dotting the delta. What will happen to those people if the project, which aims to acquire a total of 836 acres of land to set up its tourism complexes and use 250 square kilometres of the total 490 square kilometres of water surface under the Sundarbans biosphere reserve, is put into place? Environmentalists fear the mega project will cause large-scale pollution in the rivers snaking through the Sundarbans and destroy the mangrove forests, which, besides hosting a rich and diverse flora and fauna, protect the inland from the fury of cyclones.

An environment movement is slowly building up against the project. Senior government functionaries admit that activists from different countries have already inundated the Union environment ministry with protest e-mails. Even schoolchildren have joined the campaign. Rukmini Das, a Class IX student at Modern High School, zipped an e-mail to Bengal chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, urging him to scrap the project. "Rather than help people, the project is likely to destroy the means of survival for millions of people dependent on fishing," she explains.

The project itself is still mired in secrecy — one of the reasons why local people are suspicious of its

intent. Even the public representatives from the Sundarbans were not taken into confidence by the state government before it announced the project.

The Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) report -a mandatory document- is not readily available in Bengali, says Bonani Kakkar of PUBLIC, a Calcutta-based environment group. At a public hearing on the project in Parthorprotima in January -where she says there were more project officials than villagers- there were not enough copies of the report in Bengali for villagers. Worse, says Kakkar, the EIA was prepared by Modular Consultants Pvt. Ltd, an agency appointed by Sahara. "There's a conflict of interest there. An independent agency should have done the EIA," she says. "It was a complete farce," she adds.

"We need to debate what sort of development we want and for whom," says Porua, a headmaster of a local high school. "Would it be for locals or for big companies out to make money from the Sundarbans," he says with a note of anger in his voice. The murmurs of protests are, meanwhile, fast reaching a crescendo as activists gear up for their campaign. A new forum -called the Citizens' Concern for Sundarbans- is ready to take the government on. A total of 19 small organisations working in the Sundarbans have also joined the campaign, forming a group called the Sundarban Chetna. "We have already ripped out the wooden poles erected by the administration to mark the land to be acquired for the project in Kaikhali," says Dinesh Das, co-ordinator of Sundarban Chetna. The group plans to stage sit-ins and skits at all 18 blocks in the Sundarbans. "We will continue with the agitation till the government abandons the project," Das says.

The battle has just begun.

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