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Inside Sundarbans: Wildlife and climate displacements haunt partition refugees

Centenarian Mohindhoro Patra is a rare living witness to the making of 20th century settlements in the Sundarbans, the majority of which sprang up after India's independence from British rule in 1947.

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In 1947, Patra and his son who was by then a young man, noticed waves of Partition refugees pouring into the area.

By Guneeta Singh Bhalla

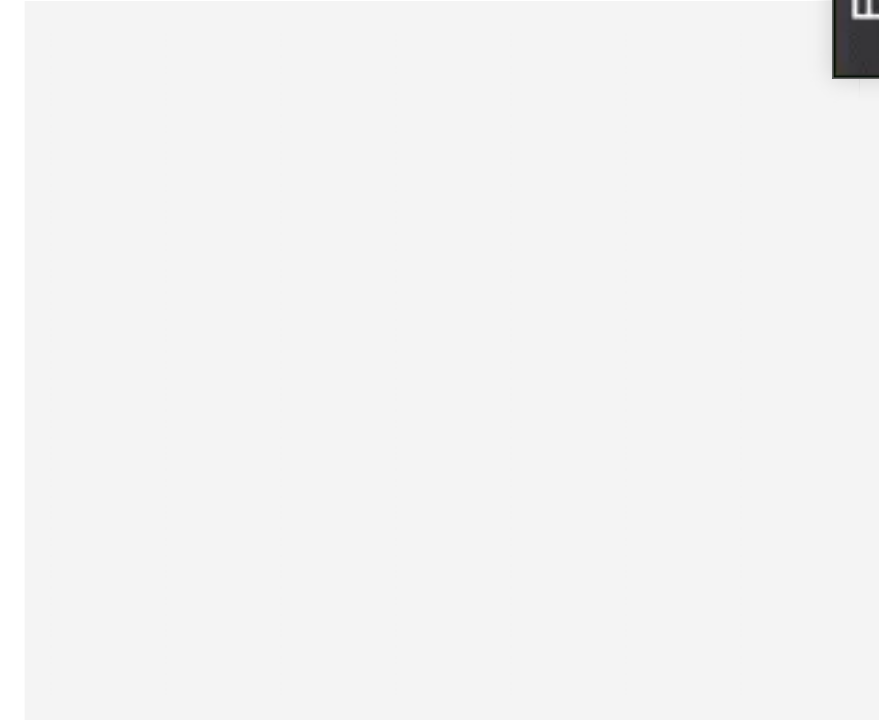
There's power in numbers in the mangrove forests," Amrita tells me. We were walking down a narrow, raised mud path. A river lined with mangroves flowed to our left, and a cluster of mud-thatch homes sprinkled the island to our right. As we walked toward the open forest, the homes dwindled down to a single lane along the path. One by one residents came out and joined our growing entourage. "We are less likely to get attacked by tigers if there are many of us together," explained Amrita.

Several of the women joining us were not wearing visible symbols of marriage: gold jewelry and vermilion in their hair. I learned from Amrita that they lost their husbands to tiger attacks, a common occurrence in the area. Some lost children to crocodiles. Development and government workers often refer to them as the "tiger widows," highlighting their plight after the loss of their families' primary breadwinners.

The calm of the forest and the gentle evening sun created an atmosphere so peaceful that dangers as severe as the ones I was hearing about felt misplaced.

I had followed Amrita Das Gupta, a 25-year-old student researcher from Jadavpur University, into the Sundarbans mangrove forests which straddle the coasts of India and Bangladesh, a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site. The islands are home to man-eating tigers, crocodiles, venomous snakes and other formidable wildlife. We came in search of Mohindhoro Patra, believed to be 108 years old, whose memories we were recording for the 1947 Partition Archive.

Centenarian Mohindhoro Patra is a rare living witness to the making of 20th century settlements in the Sundarbans, the majority of which sprang up after India's independence from British rule in 1947. The state of Bengal, home to the Sunderbans, was partitioned between newly defined India and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). It was a time of great upheaval, giving rise to unprecedented communal violence and the largest mass refugee



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upheaval, giving rise to unprecedented communal violence and the largest mass refugee crisis in recorded history; nearly 1% of the global population became homeless then.

“There are Partition refugees here whose stories will not be passed down to future generations... because the next generation is poised to face their own trauma of displacement,” Amrita lamented.

“The Sundarbans are flooding. They will become climate refugees. They will have new traumas to deal with, and their histories will be lost,” she said. In the Sundarbans, one massive implication of the political and now climactic turmoil is the erosion of regional social history.

Amrita’s academic research on life in the Sundarbans was inspired by her grandmother’s social work in the area. My own life story is connected to Partition. My paternal grandparents were displaced from Lahore, Pakistan to Delhi, India in 1947. To help fill the gaps in our collective understanding of Partition’s immense human toll, I founded The 1947 Partition Archive in 2010, a crowdsourced effort to record oral histories.

Through Amrita’s local contacts we found Mohindhoro Patra. As we approached his property from the boat launch, we found him walking over to a small thatched roof hut besides a pond, furnished with a single hand-woven bed covered in blankets. Amrita spotted a water snake.

Relying on his cane, Patra slowly walked over to the bed. He was surrounded by his 87-year-old son, his grandson and several village members. Barefoot and slightly hunched, he appeared otherwise sturdy and healthy for his age.


“What is your full name?” asked Amrita. Patra pondered over each question, sometimes a full minute, and answered softly.

He answered in Bengali, which Amrita summarized for me. “He belonged to a land-owning family in Ashrampur, Orissa (now Odisha), where he fell in love with a girl from a different caste. He sold his land inheritance for 80 rupees and the young teenagers eloped together to the storied land of eighteen tides — Atharo Bhatir Desh (Sunderbuns). They were lured by the Scottish business mogul Daniel Hamilton’s vision of economic development in the area, and the promise of a wealthy life supported by abundant forest and water resources. A different reality met him in the Sundarbans however, and soon he was immersed in a life of daily struggles with nature. He was hired by Hamilton to row his personal boat and became the chauffeur for Hamilton’s wife, Lady Margarete Elizabeth Hamilton.

“Once when he was rowing Hamilton’s wife on an expedition to the forest, they were attacked by a tiger, which he attempted to fight off. He doesn’t recall the details but he survived the attack and was taken to a hospital at Sealdah in Kolkata.” He survived another attack a few years later. He has largely blocked both memories but showed us deep scars on his legs. His survival in such a dangerous environment for an entire century seems nothing less than a miraculous feat.

In 1947, Patra and his son who was by then a young man, noticed waves of Partition refugees pouring into the area. “He usually encountered them on his boat, as he taxied passengers between two neighbouring islands in Gosaba. He helped house and shelter several of them in his own tiny hut until they were allotted land to deforest and construct their own huts. He fondly remembers one refugee named Bipin Halder, whom he housed along with his family in his hut.” Patra’s lived memories provide a rare eye witness glimpse into how displaced people made the Sundarbans a home following Partition, over 70 years ago.

After two hours in our company, Patra was visibly exhausted and Amrita made plans to return on a future date. I remained curious and eager to hear the rest.




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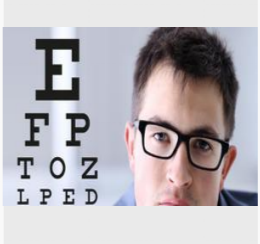
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Researchers at Jadavpur University point to census data, noting that nearly three quarters of the 4.3 million inhabitants residing here today settled in large waves following the Partition. Upper and middle class refugees who arrived first, were provided land allotments in arable inland farms and urban areas like Kolkata with more economic opportunities. Refugees belonging to marginalized Hindu castes, in contrast, flowed into West Bengal later, beginning in the early 1950s, and received land allotments in the Sundarbans swamplands instead.

As a result, a large portion of the Sundarbans' inhabitants are nonnative and lack generational knowledge on surviving here. Perhaps this explains the environmental burdens felt by the tiger widows and many others here today, which the tribal inhabitants have developed coping mechanisms for over many generations.

Today, Patra, along with his family and millions of others who also call these islands home are in danger as they become the world's first climate refugees. Some islands, such as Ghoramara, have drowned already and the water continues to rise at a rate of about 5 millimeters (0.2 inches) annually. The Center for Oceanographic Studies at Jadavpur University estimates that as many as 70,000 people will be displaced as early as 2020. The estimates for internal displacement are in the tens of millions over the next few decades. Where will they go? Is the world prepared to receive them?

"The Sundarbans are famous for being a biological reserve but human history has been overshadowed," Amrita tells me. She seems determined to become the messenger who delivers their untold stories to the world, in the hopes that history will not repeat itself.

(The author is the founder of The 1947 Partition Archive, a first of its kind, and largest public history platform that documents people's history of partition through crowdsourcing)



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