

# The Sundarbans: Whose World Heritage Site?

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The article, 'The Sundarbans: Whose World Heritage Site?' uses the Sahara India Group's advertisement of their project on 'virgin islands' to discuss how representations of the Sundarbans have always tried to do away with humans. The piece argues that one needs to address the omission of people from images of the Sundarbans because such images, whether for wildlife preservation, or in bids at rebranding the place for global marketing, end up increasing the alienation between the inhabitants of the Sundarbans and its wildlife.

The Sundarbans have often been portrayed as devoid of people. They were first perceived as a repulsive place; the British later thought of them as a 'wasteland.' The British gazetteer-writer, Hunter, in 1875, devoted an entire book to the Sundarbans. In this, after writing at great length about the forest and wild animals he only mentioned the people in passing, referring to them as a 'few wandering tribes' and classifying them after long lists of wild animals and plants. This attitude of those in power towards the inhabitants of the Sundarbans region as 'unimportant' or even 'disposable' took a tragic turn in 1979 when the 30,000 to 35,000 East-Bengali refugees, who had sought refuge on

the island of Morichjhanpi, were brutally evicted.

They had come with the hope that they would be allowed to stay (as the Communists had suggested when they were in opposition). But the fact that it was a Tiger Reserve (since 1973), was the excuse to turn out the refugees. The refugees who refused to leave either died of starvation or cholera, or were killed. The Sundarbans islanders often referred to this episode as 'the massacre of Morichjhanpi'; it marked for them the beginning of a politics of betrayal by both the urban elite as well as tigers. They argued that even the tigers, taking their cue from the Government's treatment of them as lesser mortals, had started feeding on them.

Thus, for the Sundarbans islanders, while the tiger's image was gaining prominence and was being used to frame ethical debates around the issue of wildlife parks by various trans-national animal-based charities in bids to obtain funding, the very animal was turning, like their Government, into an alien. The islanders started to see the state's investment in tourism and wildlife sanctuaries as instituting an unequal distribution of resources between them and wild animals.

The matter took an ironical twist in 2000 when the Government proposed setting up a nuclear power plant on the island of Jharkhali and then again in 2002 when the Supreme Court ordered the eviction of fishermen from the island of Jambudwip in view of the proposed Sahara project.

What appears ironical to the islanders is that although refugees were evicted from Morichjhanpi on the grounds that the forest needed protecting, the Government now wants to install a power plant and a large tourist project. They argue that while the world is shrinking and people from outside the Sundarbans are increasingly interested in their tigers, their own options of making a decent livelihood are disappearing, and their very presence is seen as illegitimate or even criminal in what has become a trans-national World Heritage Site.

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