

Chittagong Hill Tracts: Peace in Our Time?

by Naeem Mohaiemen

Chittagong Hill Tracts: 5093 square miles, 10 per cent of Bangladesh's total land area. Its forest area is 47% of the country's total forest land. Ethnic minority groups include Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Chak, Khyang, Khumi, Murung, Lushai, Bawm and Pankho.

A SENSE of irony appears to be absent from the Bengali psyche. Every year, we mourn our martyrs of 1971 with appropriate solemnity. Yet, few voices are raised against our own history in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

After decades of bloody uprising in the Hill Tracts, a potential Peace Treaty is being discussed. But, as a raucous debate breaks out over the accord, Juma voices are noticeably absent from the political cacophony. In the end, it appears that the Juma community have been reduced to being pawns in a power struggle between the AL and the BNP. The ongoing debate needs to be recast as a dialogue between the Juma and the Bengali people, not between our political parties.

The time for a Peace Accord is now — but it must be an accord that gives the Juma their due share and compensates for past losses. Much has been said about protecting Bengali settlers' rights in the area, but we also have to respect the Juma peoples' rights in their own homeland. The year 1971 ushered in 26 years of independence for Bengalis, but the Juma exchanged one oppressive master for another. As a nation born from genocide, Bangladesh has a historical and moral obligation to treat the people of Chittagong Hill Tracts with respect as equal citizens.

A Chronology of Events of the Chittagong Hill Tracts

14th century - Sawngma

(Chakma) Raja Marekyaja migrates from Arakan hills to Chittagong belt to establish his rule and dynasty.

1715-1760- Chakma king Jallal Khan establishes treaty with the Mughal Nawab.

1715-1760- CHT is independent kingdom, paying revenue from Colton/Karpas to the Mughal Nawab. Hence the name 'Karpas Region'.

1760-1780- CHT maintains independent kingdom status, but pays revenue to the British rulers.

1777 & 1780- Chakma warriors fight the East India Company.

1787- Chakma king Jan Baksh Khan pledges allegiance to East India Company. Chittagong Hill Tracts goes under complete control of the British. British pledge not to intervene in administrative affairs of the region. Hunter cites an 1829 regulation to say, 'In 1829, Mr. Halhed, the Commissioner stated that the hill tribes were not British subjects but merely tributaries and that we recognized no right on our part to interfere with their internal arrangements.'

20 June, 1860- Notification No 3302 separates the hill area of Chittagong from Chittagong district and creates an independent district called Parbatya Chittagong.

1861- Parliament passes Indian Council Law. The Law recognizes the regulations passed by Governor General or local authorities with regards to areas outside the Law's jurisdiction.

1870- Government Of India

Act passed, allowing the Governor General to amend laws related to the 'special areas'.

1881- Chittagong Hill Tracts Police Regulation 1881 allows Hill Tracts people to form their own independent police force.

1 May, 1900- Chittagong Hill Tracts Manual law passed. The area is given exemption from administration as an 'Excluded Area' to help preserve minority 'tribal' culture and heritage. CHT divided into Chakma, Bomang and Mong Circle. Headmen and Karbari to act as local administrators. Manual's Regulation 34 banned non-hill people from buying or acquiring land in the area.

1920 & 1925. Manual revised to further enhance the safety of the Tribal people.

1935- India Rule Law ratifies and recognizes validity of CHT Regulation (1900).

17 August, 1947- As partition approaches, Lord Mountbatten pressures Sir Cyril Radcliffe to redraw his lines—over the Chittagong Hill Tracts and several Punjab districts. In the end, Radcliffe assigns CHT to the new state of Pakistan.

15-20 August, 1947- Chittagong Hill Tracts People's Association expresses their doubt as to whether their rights will be preserved if they are assigned to Pakistan. The Association

raises the Indian flag in the Rangamati District Administrator's office. Some leaders of the Bomang Royal family also protest by raising Burmese flag in Bandarban.

21 August, 1947- Baluch Regiment arrives in Chittagong Hill Tracts and forces protesters to lower Indian flag. The Regiment then raises the Pakistan flag. Tribal leaders Kamini Mohon Dewan and Sneha Kumar Chakma clash over whether Tribal rights will be protected in Pakistan. A large group that is fearful for their rights give up their land and cross over into India.

1948- The new Pakistan government expresses suspicion over allegiance of Hill Tracts people, removing Chittagong Hill Tracts Police Regulation 1881. In fear of their safety, several thousand Tribal people seek refuge in India and Burma. Later, when the Indian and Burmese governments attempt to bring international pressure to take back the refugees, the Pakistan government agrees to abide by 1900 Chittagong Hill Tracts Manual Law.

1950- Violating Chittagong Hill Tracts Manual law, Pakistan government settles several hundred Muslim families in Nanaichar, Longdu and Bandarban.

1956- Chittagong Hill Tracts Manual law 1900 is ratified in the first Constitution.

1962- The Pakistan government begins to take away Tribal control by replacing the phrase 'separate ruled area' with 'Tribal (Upajati) Area' and making major changes to the regulation.

1957-1962- Kaptai Hydro Electric Project Dam is built. Forty per cent of agriculture land in CHT goes under water. Thousands of Hill Tracts people lose their only source of income.

1964- Hill Tracts people who lost their lands in the Kaptai Dam project are moved to Rehabilitation Areas. Dissatisfied with the rehabilitation efforts 50,000 families take refuge in India. Twenty thousand of these refugees are later settled by the Indian government in the Arunachal area. The remainder settle in Tripura and other Indian states.

1971- Bangladesh Liberation War begins. Major Ziaur Rahman and his troops escape to India via CHT, with help from tribals in the area.

December 5, 1971- After Pakistani soldiers vacate Chittagong's Panchori region, non-tribal freedom fighters kill 14 Hill Tracts people. Authorities forbid tribal freedom fighters when they attempt to intervene.

January 29, 1972- Newly independent Bangladesh's leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, assures Chakma representatives that Chakmas would get their due share of government jobs.

February 15, 1972- Representatives of the Chakma King hand over a 4-point manifesto to Sheikh Mujib, asking for autonomy for Chittagong Hill Tracts.

April 24, 1972- Manobendro Narayan Lama, member of the King's council, presents the 4-point manifesto to the committee drafting the Bangladesh constitution.

June 24, 1972- Lama forms a regional political party, the Chittagong Hill Tracts Solidarity Party, to champion the cause of regional autonomy.

February 13, 1973- During a tour of the Hill Tracts, Sheikh Mujib says, 'From today, there are no tribal sub-groups in Bangladesh; everyone is a Bengali.'

In the general elections of 1973, the tribals' Solidarity Party wins two seats in the Parliament for Lama and Chai Thowai Rowza.

August 1973- The political landscape shifts radically after Sheikh Mujib's assassination. Lama goes into hiding and the Solidarity Party creates an armed militant wing, the Shanti Bahini.

1976- Under the leadership of Ziaur Rahman, the Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Board is created, with Area Commander of Chittagong Cantonment as Chairman. The Board sets up a plan to rehabilitate the resettled Bengali people in Chittagong. Chakma land is redistributed among Bengali settlers, and they also receive government loans to cover their basic food expenses.

May 29, 1977- The Shanti Bahini launches a lethal attack on local armed forces. In retaliation, both the Army and Navy in the area are fortified to the extent that the ratio of armed forces to CHT residents is 1:5.

December 26, 1977- In a direct warning to Shanti Bahini and Chakmas, Chittagong Cantonment Area Commander Maj. Gen. Manzur announces, 'We don't want you. You can go off wherever you please. We just want your land.'

1979- Professor R.I. Chowdhury of Chittagong University leads a survey team to interview tribals. The results are uniformly critical of the Kaptai Dam project. Ninety-three per cent felt they were economically self-sufficient before the flooding. Eighty-nine per cent claim they lost their homes due to flooding, and sixty-nine per cent said the compensation

they received was insufficient.

March 25, 1980- The Kalampati (Kaokhali) Massacre: the local Martial Law Commander convenes a Chakma meeting at a Buddhist temple. Officers open fire on the gathering, creating a death toll of almost 300. Non-tribals attack Buddhist temples and Chakma residences in the area.

MP Upendra Lal Chakma organizes a press conference demanding justice. He accompanies two opposition MPs, Shahjahan Shiraj and Rashed Khan Menon, on a site visit.

April 25, 1980- In a press conference, the 3 MPs demand immediate inclusion of Chakma autonomy into the Bangladesh constitution, curtailing of Army presence and cessation of 'non-tribal' resettlement in the area.

December 1980- The Zia government, after light criticism of the Kalampati massacre, passes the Disturbed Area Bill, bestowing upon the Chittagong Police Sub-Inspector and any Non-Commissioned Army Officers the right to shoot individuals suspected of illegal activities and the right to raid any home suspected of storing weapons.

July 29, 1980- Following an earlier closed-door meeting with Chakma leaders, President Zia is quoted in *The Guardian* (London) as saying, 'We are doing some wrong here. We are being unfair to the tribals. It is a political problem that is being dealt with by Police and Army action. Yet it can be settled politically very easily. We have no basis for taking over these lands and pushing these people into a corner. We should at least call a meeting of these tribal leaders and ask them their demands.'

May 30, 1981- President Zia is assassinated in Chittagong in a coup led by Maj. Gen. Manzur.

February 5, 1982- Led by the President's Secretary on Tribal Affairs Subimol Dewan, a group of tribal and non-tribal representatives meet with President Abdus Sattar. The Sattar regime does not see any further resolution of the Tribal problem; the few educational and occupational quotas created under Zia are gradually eliminated.

July 27, 1982- After coming to power, General Ershad meets with three Chakma leaders. He sends Chittagong Cantonment Area Commander Maj. Gen. Manraj as his representative to Rangamati.

October 3, 1983- Gen. Ershad proposes a package deal to resolve the Hill Tracts crisis. Meanwhile, a rift within the Solidarity Party leads to the assassination of Manobendro Narayan Lama at the hands of supporters of rival Priti Kumar Chakma.

1984- In their report to the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP), the Anti-Slavery Society of London criticizes the Bangladesh delegation's report at previous year's session. In particular the Bangladesh delegation's claim that 'Bangladesh has no indigenous population' comes under attack.

May 1985- Asian Conference On Religion And Peace (South Korea) presents report on 'The Crisis of the Chittagong Hill Tracts' which accuses Bangladesh of violating ILO Convention 107 on Tribal and Indigenous Populations.

October 21, 1985- The 1st summit meeting between the Solidarity Party and the government takes place, with promise of further resolution at a 2d summit scheduled for Christmas. However, the 2nd summit falls through and rehabilitation of non-tribals continues.

August 2, 1985- Bangladesh delegation to UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations strongly attacks London-based Anti-Slavery Society's report on Hill Tracts. The delegation chair calls the report 'baseless allegations' and 'attempts to tarnish the image' of

Bangladesh.

1986- First International Conference on Chittagong Hill Tracts held in Amsterdam.

June 2/ July 27, 1986 - Shanti Bahini launches two separate attacks on the non-tribal population. In retaliation, Bengali settlers pillage local Chakma communities.

Many tribals are frightened into crossing the border into India's Tripura kingdom. Meanwhile, the government claims there are 30,000 non-tribal settlers in CHT, not 50,000 as reported by Juma activists.

September 19, 1987- In an effort to restore peace to the area, tribal leaders meet with Gen. Ershad and resolve to find a political solution to the Chakma problem, as opposed to the Shanti Bahini's search for a solution through violence. Ershad formulates a National Committee headed by the Planning Minister A. K. Khondokar.

December 17, 1987- June 19, 1988 - No resolution is reached during four summit meetings between the government and the Solidarity Party. A 5-point manifesto for regional autonomy is rejected on the grounds that it is untenable under a one-party government.

Political solutions circumventing the autonomy issue, including a bid to include Chakma representatives within the government, are rejected by the Solidarity Party.

December 1987- CHT Commission is formed in Netherlands by UN International Working Group on Indigenous Affairs. Commission later brings out influential 'Life Is Not Ours' report, which faults Bangladesh government for failing to enter Peace Talks with tribal leaders.

August 8, 1988 - The Bagaichar Massacre: an attack on tribal villages in retaliation for a Shanti Bahini attack on Army troops.

June 14/ 15, 1988 - The 6th summit meeting breaks down in spite of the Solidarity Party's compromise in changing the terminology from 'regional' to 'local' autonomy.

February 28, 1989 - A bill is passed in the Parliament to allow the creation of local governments in all three districts. These local governments would be led by a 'tribal' elected by all members of the Local Government Council.

May 4, 1989 - The Shanti Bahini launches an armed response to sabotage the local governments and their electoral process, leading to the assassination of Sub-District Committee Chairman Abdur Rashid Sarkar. In retaliation, settlers attack local Chakma villages, reducing them to infernos. This incident is known as the 'Longdu Massacre'. The martial law government takes over the electoral process, installing its own representatives.

July-August 1990- The UN Economic & Social Council Commission on Human Rights (Working Group on Indigenous Populations) reviews the state of Chittagong Hill Tracts. The number of Hill Tracts refugees in India is reported to be 70,000.

December 6, 1990- Gen. Ershad is toppled from power by a popular uprising. In the ensuing melee, a Committee of Tribal students stage a press conference demanding the removal of the local governments.

April 10, 1992- Bengali settler Kabir Ahmed is killed, allegedly for the attempted rape of a Juma woman. In retaliation, settlers and law enforcement authorities devastate the Chakma village of Logang, with a death toll of 300. A wave of international condemnation follows. In Japan, 130 NGOs and individuals organize a protest against the incident. Later this coalition forms 'Japan Committee on CHT Issues', Anti-Slavery International, Survival International and Amnesty International send protest letters to Bangladesh High Commission in London.

Khaleida Zia's government forms an inquiry committee to investigate the massacre.

April 22, 1992- At Bangladesh Aid Consortium meeting in Paris, Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman is greeted by protests against Logang massacre by European human rights organizations.

September 18, 1992- PCJSS chairman Jyotirindriyo Bodhipriya Larma, alias Shantu Larma, flies into Dhaka for first time since beginning of insurgency to begin talks with the government.

September 18, 1997 - After four days of talks, Shantu Larma announces a draft agreement to end the insurgency. Cease-fire is extended until Dec 31. A focal point of the agreement is resolution of disputes over land ownership.

October 14, 1997 - At a rally in Bogra, BNP leader Khaleida Zia accuses government of conspiring to hand CHT over to India. She also accuses the government of planning to withdraw the army from the area.

October 17, 1997 - PM Sheikh Hasina assures country that army won't be withdrawn from CHT. She also says: 'We don't want our people, the citizens of a sovereign country, to stay as refugees in other countries.'

November 1, 1997 - In response to calls for making the draft Peace Treaty public, Sheikh Hasina says full disclosure prior to signing may cause complications.

November 26, 1997 - Parbatya Chittagong Jan Sanghat Samity (PCJSS) to hold seventh round of talks with National Committee on CHT (NCCHT) in Dhaka to finalise the Peace Accord.

May 1992- Amnesty International issues report on Logang killings and sends letter to Bangladesh government asking for full inquiry into tribal deaths.

May 19, 1992- Violence escalates in the area when yet another youth fracas leads to the formation of a non-tribal Greater Chittagong Committee for Student Uprising.

May 20, 1992- Frustrated over government inaction over local violence, Gautam Dewan, Chairman of the Rangamati Local Government Council, hands in his resignation.

July 8, 1992- The BNP government presents a bill in the Parliament to increase the life-span of the local governments. It expects the same opposition from Tribal members among the rival Awami League party, the bill is passed.

July 10, 1992- The government creates a committee to resolve the Chakma problem, led by Communications Minister Oli Ahmed. Leaders of the 3 local governments question legitimacy of the Committee for not including elected MPs.

October 7, 1992- Justice SH Khan's 'Logang Disturbances Inquiry Commission' brings out a report blaming the Shanti Bahini for causing the Logang massacre. The report is criticized for biased findings. On page 24, the report states '[Bengali settlers] must raise their own security force namely village defense party who should be given arms and training for protection of the village'—this statement is widely seen as condoning Bengali violence against Juma people.

November 5, 1992- The first summit meeting between the Solidarity Party and the Committee ends unresolved.

November 17, 1992- The Naniachar massacre: a Tribal student protest is responded to by an army attack on the village of Naniachar, with 90 tribals killed. Although an inquiry committee is launched by the government, its report remains unpublished.

December 10, 1992- International Year of World's Indigenous People begins. The event is a catalyst for controversy in Bangladesh as a government Minister declares 'Bangladesh has no indigenous people'. The statement is condemned by NGOs, activists and Juma leaders. Faced by government inaction, NGOs organize 'Indigenous Peoples Day'.

March 1995- The US State Department's '1994 Human Rights Report' reports that government settlement programs increased the number of Bengalis in CHT from 3 per cent in 1947 to 45 per cent in 1994.

March 23, 1995 - 45 Bangladesh intellectuals sign a statement accusing Bandarban Police of organizing attacks on tribal settlements. They include Justice K.M. Sobhan, Dr Kamal Hossain, Abdul Mannan Chowdhury, Dr Humayun Azad and Meghna Guha Thakurata.

1996- Juma People's Network of Asia Pacific Australia (JUMNAPA) publishes paper reporting on militarisation of Hill Tracts. According to the report, in 1994 there was 1 army officer for every 15 tribals (or 'Juma' people).

June 23, 1996 - The Awami League (AL), led by Sheikh Hasina, is elected to power. In the Chittagong Hill tracts constituencies, AL members win the Parliament seats through repeated promises to work towards solving the tribal problem. After the election, however, there is consternation at government inaction.

July 18, 1996- Government estimate says 8,000 tribals, soldiers and civilians have been killed to date. Tribal activists say the number is much higher.

September 30, 1996 - The Solidarity Party calls a one-month cease-fire to promote discussion with the government. Belatedly, the government forms a National Committee with the aim of resolving the Chakma crisis.

1997- In the 3d update to 'Life Is Not Ours' report, CHT Commission (the Netherlands) says, 'negotiations can be successful only if the traditional systems of land rights in CHT are acknowledged'.

September 14, 1997 - PCJSS chairman Jyotirindriyo Bodhipriya Larma, alias Shantu Larma, flies into Dhaka for first time since beginning of insurgency to begin talks with the government.

September 18, 1997 - After four days of talks, Shantu Larma announces a draft agreement to end the insurgency. Cease-fire is extended until Dec 31. A focal point of the agreement is resolution of disputes over land ownership.

October 14, 1997 - At a rally in Bogra, BNP leader Khaleida Zia accuses government of conspiring to hand CHT over to India. She also accuses the government of planning to withdraw the army from the area.

October 17, 1997 - PM Sheikh Hasina assures country that army won't be withdrawn from CHT. She also says: 'We don't want our people, the citizens of a sovereign country, to stay as refugees in other countries.'

November 1, 1997 - In response to calls for making the draft Peace Treaty public, Sheikh Hasina says full disclosure prior to signing may cause complications.

November 26, 1997 - Parbatya Chittagong Jan Sanghat Samity (PCJSS) to hold seventh round of talks with National Committee on CHT (NCCHT) in Dhaka to finalise the Peace Accord.

The author works in HBO's Interactive Media group in New York. He is also writing a book on 1971.

Caring for Cardiac Causes

Dr Ashok Seth — department head of invasive and interventional cardiology, Escorts Heart Institute and Research Centre, the biggest cardiac hospital in India and one of the biggest in Asia in terms of number and size — tells The Daily Star correspondent Naimul Haq about formation of the SAARC Society of Cardiology.



DS: I understand that you have signed a treaty for formation of a South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Society of Cardiology. Can you please explain what exactly would it be?

Dr Seth: The whole idea of SAARC Society of Cardiology will be commitment for the cause of the treatment of cardiovascular diseases and commitment for creating a training ground for more experts who will be able to perform these operations in their own centres at their own countries.

This is also one of my personal commitments. I believe, being in one of the leading research centres in Asia, that I need to train doctors so that the same treatment I am giving is available in their set-ups in their own countries. By initiating the SAARC SOCIETY OF CARDIOLOGY, we hope that many will get the benefit of it.

The concept of SAARC Society of Cardiology is absolutely fascinating. We have been thinking about it for a long time. The initiative has been expedited by Brig (Retd) Abdul Malek, President, Bangladesh Cardiac Society. We are a group of countries attached to each other in all respect who have similar vision for solving cardiac problems — with a same socio-economic status and similar background.

Therefore, we hope to combine together and share our views to focus on preventive aspects of cardiac disorders, rehabilitative aspects of cardiac disorders, treatment aspects of cardiac disorders and most important of all is the research approach. Unless we share knowledge, data, expertise, we cannot actually arrest the problem in any strategy or defined manner.

So, I have come here for two purposes. I am here as a representative of cardiological society of India, to represent the body at this meeting to form the SSC and also I am here as a guest lecturer at the Bangladesh Cardiac Society that has organized national conference '97 on Hypertension & Cardiovascular Diseases.

The president of cardiac society of India was also here and so were representatives of Sri Lanka and Nepal. Sri Lanka and Pakistan have agreed for the formation of the SAARC Society of Cardiology but could not arrive in time yesterday. Bhutan and the Maldives do not have cardiac societies, but we have left provisions for their inclusion. As soon as the re-

spective national cardiac societies are formed, they will be included in the SSC.

We have finalised the constitution at a formal signing ceremony and have officially formed the SAARC Society of Cardiology. This is one of the biggest step forward in addressing heart disorders in South Asia. It creates an unparalleled opportunity for individuals to train in other neighbouring countries.

DS: Can you explain what benefits would the SAARC Society of Cardiology bring?

Dr Seth: You see, a tremendous expertise exists now locally. You no longer have to go as far as the US or the UK to get train doctors or to get the know-how. This is the best opportunity for the nations to combine together. We will look for absorbing the expertise and feed

them into the system. It will involve extensive collaborative cardiological research activities.

NGOs will be involved so would the private investors who will take over for wider distribution of the common good of the whole idea.

Most of the efforts we are thinking of cannot be put alone by the governments itself. Grassroots NGOs will have to help in preventive aspects so that the message of prevention, treatment and research can reach all level of the society.

DS: How soon do you think SAARC Society of Cardiology will be able to start functioning?

Dr Seth: Once the society is registered I am sure in the next couple of months, we will start to work. In fact, we plan to meet in March next when the

Bangladesh National Institute for Cardiovascular Diseases (NICVD) is holding an important meeting. By then, representatives of Bangladesh, nominated president of SAARC Society of Cardiology, will be able to chalk out some sort of formula for concrete steps to be taken up by, say, March 1999.

DS: Do you think SAARC Society of Cardiology will contribute in reducing the number of incidences of heart disease?

Dr Seth: It depends on a number of aspects. No doubt, there is a pre-existing level that we have to focus on. So, 'that' service have to be provided first. The second aspect is prevention which will take time to come into effect. Awareness of health, smoking and other aspects have to be coordinated. We will start seeing its benefits in terms of activities over next six months to a year.

DS: Any cardiovascular disease treatment involves a lot of money. Do you think this cost can be reduced?

Dr Seth: Certainly. When it is done locally by the local experts themselves, it will automatically be cheaper. It is one of the focuses we are now discussing.

Most of the equipments used for angioplasty are imported and heavily taxed between 40 and 50 per cent in Bangladesh on life-saving devices. It adds a lot of cost. So, we have to work out on these issues which create hurdles for cheaper treatment.

SAARC Society of Cardiology will encourage the governments to open up for import of goods of levy. Because they are medical equipment and a large part of the populace in the region depend on free medical treatment. SAARC Society of Cardiology will recommend to the governments on various other issues.

DS: There is hardly any private centres for treatment of heart ailments. How does it differ from nation to nation?

Dr Seth: Science can progress only when private money is put into it. No government can take up all the bill for heart patients' welfare. What private healthcare does it provides the expertise and the technical advances. ITS GOING TO HAPPEN FROM THE PRIVATE SECTOR WHICH IS EXPECTED TO TAKE THE LEADING ROLE IN THIS SECTOR.

DS: Do we have to depend on the West for technology any longer?

Dr Seth: Not exactly we have enough here.

Majestic Marauders Fail to Roam Freely

by Aziz Amirul

Always a major attraction for the visitors in any zoo, the Bengal Tiger reigned the Sundarbans in abundance even a few decades ago, but several factors have been responsible for the tiger population to decrease at an alarming rate.

THE Royal Bengal Tiger, a majestic marauder of the Sundarbans, is surely the most precious wildlife animal found in Bangladesh. Found nowhere around the globe except in the regions of Sundarbans, world's largest mangroves, covering areas of both Bangladesh and India. Always a major attraction for the visitors in any zoo, the Bengal Tiger reigned the Sundarbans in abundance even a few decades ago, but several factors have been responsible for the tiger population to decrease at an alarming rate.

Once roaming freely, this particular species have eventually failed to avoid the dreadful clutches of its greatest enemy—Man. Tiger bones and skins have great value in the international underworld where the products are traded at a very high price. In certain Far Eastern countries, crushed tiger bones are used as medicinal ingredients, besides poaching, adverse ecological conditions are also affecting the tiger.

Majority of our rural population use wood as fuel and as a result cut down trees without any consideration. Besides,

timber is in great demand all over the country for various purposes, and for that matter, the Sundarbans comes at the top of the list. In the last couple of decades, unplanned and mass clearing of dense forests in the Sundarbans region have destroyed the natural habitat of the Royal Bengal Tigers to a large extent.

In a recent survey, it has been revealed that a significant portion of the Bengal Tiger population have migrated to jungles of the Sundarbans in the Indian part of it in search of a more suitable habitat.

In the mid '80s, a special census on the Royal Bengal Tiger was carried out by the former authority, and that showed a figure of around 5000. But at present, no one knows the exact figure in the wild and during last 10 years the species had to undergo some severe tests of survival. This time the killer was not man but nature itself. Two of the greatest natural calamities in the country's history hit the coastal belt and the regions around the Sundarbans in 1988 and 1991 decreasing the tiger population.