

## The Rights and Securities of the Children in an Agrarian Society of Sagar Island Exposed to Regular Environmental Degradation

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**Abstract:** Environment and human beings, both are very much inter-related. Long back, human beings were parasites in nature and even today most of the indigenous people depend on it in many respects. Environmental degradation causes the loss of both physical and biological life forms on earth. So, if the environment is damaged or degraded, human beings endanger their own survival too. In this context, the children of the concerned areas must be affected more in various ways. As they are the children, they have no capacity to protest against exploitation and so on.

However, the Sagar Block/Island, coastal area is situated in the extreme south corner of West Bengal. The people of this area face continuous natural hazards, land erosion, and the effect of other environmental devastation and changes. The people of this area face continuous problems in their daily life. Obviously, it has a serious impact on children. In this regard, in the light of environmental degradation, their rights and security of food, shelter, dress, education, etc. as well as childhood, socialization and personality formation, etc. are the matter of discussion of this research paper.

**Keywords:** Children, Sagar Block/Island/, Environmental devastation, Children, Daily-life, Grow-up.

### INTRODUCTION

The meaning or conception of children is varied; even the oldest person may be treated as a child by his/her parents. Officially we categorize the children on the basis of age and normally in India we indicate the 'child' who falls in the age of 0-14 years. However, the child is a bundle of joys- a flower incarnate in person. A flickering smile of the child pleases everyone. The brightness and future welfare of the society are clearly interwoven with the brightness of the child and its careful upbringing. Childhood is an important period of life, as it shapes adulthood. The very initiation of life-making is started at adulthood (Sinha 1991, 1). It is said that child is a father of man and a citizen of tomorrow. In all societies, children occupy a very important position. They are considered extremely valuable assets for society (Lal 1997, 57). Thus, they need care and protection, food and nutrition, health and treatment, shelter, dress, education, proper

socialization, personality formation as well as proper growth and development. Their primary physical, social and mental grownups happen in the family. But their needs are not always fulfilled; cared for, protected and even in many cases these are ignored.

India has recognized the right to protection for its children through its Constitutional commitments and the laws, policies and programmes. Certain provisions related to the protection of the children spring from the Constitution itself and there is a comprehensive umbrella of subsequent strong legislation protecting children's rights.

They also lay down that the state shall provide opportunities and facilities for all children to develop up to the age of 14 years. There are several constitutional provisions for children, which, among others, Article 21(A) directs the state to provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of 6-14 years, Article 23 that

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Table 1: Child Rights Guaranteed by Indian Constitution

Article	Provision
21(A)	Right to free and compulsory elementary education for all children in 6-14 years age group
24	Right to protected from any hazardous employment till the age of 14 years
39(E)	Right to protected from being abused and forced by economic necessity to enter occupations unsuited to their age or strength
39(F)	Right to equal opportunities and facilities t develop in a healthy manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity and guaranteed protection of childhood and youth against exploitation and against moral and material abandonment.
14	Right to equality
15	Right against discrimination
21	Right to personal liberty and due process of law
23	Right to being protected from being trafficked and forced into bonded labour
46	Right of weaker sections of the people to be protected from social injustice and all forms of exploitation
15(3)	State must make special provisions for women and children.
46	State must protect educational interests of weaker sections of the people
29	State must protect interests of minorities
47	The state must raise the level of nutrition and standards of living of its people and the improvement of public health.

Source: Constitution of India cited in Singh and Singh 2011, 6-7.

prohibits the trafficking of human beings and forced labour and Article 24 which prohibits the employment of children below the age of 14 years in factories, mines or any other hazardous occupations. Article 39 (F) diverts the state to ensure that children are given opportunities and facilities to develop in a healthy manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity and that childhood and both are protected against exploitation (Singh and Singh 2011, 7).

Though so many laws are there but a remarkable section of children are in the vulnerable condition in India. About half of all Indian children are undernourished, a similar proportion escapes full immunization. Malnutrition of children is one of the biggest public health problems facing the country. It adversely affects the growth and development of children including their learning ability and the capacity to cope with the problems of daily living. Similarly, prevention from abuse, neglect, and exploitation of children has been universally recognized as essential for the child's well-being and for the growth and development of the family, the community, and the nation. However, millions of children are out of schools and

engaged in economic activities for the sustenance of their families (Singh and Singh 2011, 1). There are various vulnerable and disadvantaged children such as homeless children, migrant children, street children, abandoned children, trafficked children, children affected and infected by HIV/AIDS, children belonging to SC (Scheduled Caste), ST (Scheduled Tribe) and OBCs (Other Backward Castes/Classes, malnourished children etc. in Indian society in especially difficult circumstances who need social services, for their care, protection and development. Some practices like foeticide, child marriage, child labour, child trafficking, child sex tourism, child abuse etc. are also a great hindrance to the progress and development of the children. In various ways, their rights and securities were ignored and violated. Even in many cases they were tortured, exploited, and deprived of most of the rights. But apart from these, the rights, securities, development, etc. of the children may be affected due to exposure to regular environmental degradation in various ways because the ecological and surrounding environmental consequences are deeply co-related with the socio-cultural and economic features of human beings.

The environment is the prime source of several locally produced food and vegetation, which may provide the food and nutritional quality of the concerned population. Thus, any sort of environmental change ultimately determines the changes of livelihood condition; along with it, if the socio-economic conditions get changed then the socio-cultural practices and the functions of social organization and social institutions must get altered which ultimately influences a lot on the daily ways of living (Detels et al. 2002, 199).

**Studied Area and Environmental Situation:** In the present context, the study was conducted on Sagar Block/Island, situated at the mouth of the Hooghly River. Administratively, deltaic Sagar and Ghoramara group of islands form the Sagar Community Development Block under the Kakdwip sub-division in the district of South 24-Parganas, West Bengal.

This area held an important position from the environmental and ecological point of view. There are a number of factors such as salinity<sup>1</sup>, sandy soil, various environmental hazards like soil erosion<sup>2</sup>, the daily inter tidal flow or tidal waves, tidal flooding, river fluxes, long-shore currents, and sea-level changes, cyclones<sup>3</sup> and storms etc. threaten the ecosystem as well as human life at Sagar Islands.

Every year the sea encroaches on a large portion of the mud banks. The continuous destruction and re-formation of lands have created instability in the natural vegetation pattern.

In fact, in the last 142 years (1855-1997) due to soil erosion, 65.29 km<sup>2</sup> (23 per cent) area of land of the island was washed away and became a part of the sea. Originally, the Sagar Islands covered nine Gram Panchayats (GPs) with 46 mouzas<sup>4</sup>, but due to soil erosion three mouzas were eroded, and even at that time among the 27 waterfront mouzas of Sagar Block, 23 were constantly being reduced due to soil erosion; among which nine mouzas had lost more than 25 per cent of their original extension (Bandyopadhyay 1997a, 27-29; 1997b, 52-53; and Bandyopadhyay et al. 2004, 253-254; and Maity 2005, 25). Moreover, the area eroded by 22.95 per cent between 1851-55 (284.55 km<sup>2</sup>) and 1997 (219.26 km<sup>2</sup>).

The 6 mt. high frontal dune belt was almost wiped out and two successive rows of

embankments were destroyed between 1992 and 1995. The earlier embankment was abandoned. Generally, the erosion takes place during the monsoons (June - September) owing to atrocious wave climate<sup>5</sup>, increased occurrence of tropical cyclones and a raised local sea level (due to increasing freshwater input or freshets) - all coincide. Besides these, erosion takes place by tropical cyclones that occur in October and November and extremely in December (Bandyopadhyay 1997b, 52-56).

Oceanic originated cyclones heat the coasts of West Bengal and particularly the studied area, Sagar block four to five times a year on account of its position at the head of the Bay of Bengal. These violent storms were far more destructive of lives and properties than either droughts or floods (O'Malley 1914, reprinted 1998: 168). Climate is tropical and cyclonic storms ravage the area during the late spring and early summer, and also whenever a depression is formed in the Bay of Bengal. The great atmospheric disturbance affected the whole delta and in this regard, it was more serious particularly in the case of the Sagar Islands. In between 1823 - 1869, Sagar islands faced 12 major cyclonic storms on such scales as to seriously affect the crops and lives. As an example, one such serious cyclone took place on 5 October 1864 (Pargiter 1934, reprinted 2002, 341). The storm-wave entered Sagar Island where it was 11 feet above the level of the land. At Sagar Island, the wave destroyed nearly every building and left scarcely any living creature on the Island. The few people that did escape saved themselves either by climbing trees or by floating on the roofs of their houses, which the wave carried inland. It was reported that 73.6 per cent of people died (Hunter 1875, reprinted 1998, 266-267). And more than 15 serious cyclonic storms also occurred from 1900 to 2009, which destroyed the crops, lives including man and cattle, houses and other properties to a great degree. However, the natural environmental hazards like cyclones, storms, tidal waves and floods seriously told upon the daily life of the people of Sagar block in various ways such as breaking of coastal embankments, destruction of crops, erosion of farm-lands and settlements and damaging of other properties conspicuously. Officially 1462 families were displaced several times

owing to soil erosion at Sagar block. And among them, the Government gave rehabilitation to 447 families only. Apart from the above displaced and rehabilitated families, many were also displaced from different villages/mouzas of the Sagar Block due to the same reasons and they were living on the river embankment or in different places of the islands or outside of the islands such as Medinipur, Howrah and the mainland of South 24-Parganas on their own behalf but there was no official record.

However, the environmental scenario of Sagar Island as well as the mouth of Hooghly River was changed due to several reasons too. The flow of fresh water and deposition of sediment got changed due to the construction of the Farakka Barrage<sup>6</sup> and other embankments on different rivers. As a consequence, the silt deposition, flood, soil erosion and the salinity of water were increased to a great extent. The biotic environment and particularly the availability of marine fishes were being seriously affected. As a whole, the flora including mangroves and other plants and different fauna as well as the economy of the people got affected.

**Studied Village and People:** To examine the issue, the study was conducted on four villages. Among them, two were settled villages namely Bagpara, Khasimara, situated at Ghoramara Island while another two were rehabilitated villages namely Jibantala and Kamalpur situated at Sagar Island. The studied people of both these rehabilitated villages were the early inhabitants of different villages of Ghoramara Island who got the rehabilitation there because of displacement caused by home and land erosion and property destruction at Ghoramara Island.

Natural calamities and soil erosion mostly affected Ghoramara Island where it's 55.01 per cent (1992) area of land was already eroded and became a part of the river. In this regard, the village Bagpara<sup>7</sup> was less eroded whereas the village Khasimara<sup>8</sup> was highly eroded as its 96.89 per cent area of land was washed away and now a part of the river; and except a very few, the land of the people of rehabilitated villages were fully eroded when they lived at Ghoramara Island.

In the four studied villages, there was a total of 381 families. The people consisted of Hindus and Muslims and were settled in all the studied four villages. Among them, nearly three-fourth (73.23 per cent) was the Hindu families. The total studied population was 2,121 in which the Hindus were around 69 per cent and Muslims were around 31 per cent. The average sex ratio of the studied people was nearly 988. Meanwhile, among the Hindus and Muslims it was 961 and 1,050 respectively.

### ***Impact of Environmental Devastation on the Studied People***

The studied area was exposed to mainly three types of environmental problems or degradation viz. soil erosion, inundation of cropland by salt-water due to high-tide, flood and storm. In this concern how this environmental degradation affects the shelter, food, health, economy and the social aspects of the studied population are discussed below.

**Shelter:** Among the studied people considering the consequences of environmental degradation the house erosion was well observed. Around 87 per cent of studied families were the victim of house erosion, and among them, the houses of 77.27 per cent families were eroded twice or more than that in their life span. However, the families of rehabilitated villages were the worst victims of house erosion earlier at Ghoramara Island implying more insecurity and distress.

At Ghoramara Island, nearly 15 per cent of studied families did not have any own homestead land. The homestead landholding pattern of around 80 per cent of families was quite poor. Again, the houses of the studied families of Bagpara and Khasimara villages of Ghoramara Island were becoming closer to the river due to soil erosion and even in many cases it was nearer to the river embankment. One-fourth of the houses were on the river embankment. In settled villages around 85 per cent of families had only one room house each. Again, 136 (35.70 per cent) families were rehabilitated at Sagar Island. Each family was given single room accommodation where space was not enough. Most of their houses were quite poor and broken up in construction which was not reconstructed or repaired by the people due to their

financial constraints and therefore, they had to live with a high risk of collapse. In both these situations, the children could not read and there was no separate space for cooking even privacy was characteristically lacking in such situations.

**Economy:** The studied people and mainly the cultivators were exposed to excessive precipitation, natural hazards as well as environmental degradation resulting in soil erosion, prolonged inundations and the consequent destruction of the paddy seedlings. In the recent past due to the influx of saline water caused by the breaking of embankments the *aman* paddy (late autumnal crop of paddy) and other green vegetables were mostly being destroyed every year. Due to the same the production of grass, as well as fodder, got reduced which caused a lesser number of domestic cattle. In this regard at Sagar Block, mainly due to soil erosion, out of its 46 mouzas, three mouzas were completely eroded in the river and another 27 mouzas were constantly being eroded. However, Ghoramara mouza was the worst affected area at the Sagar Block because its 55.01 per cent area of land was eroded. A number of settlements went into the river water. Due to continuous environmental degradation around 89 per cent of studied families lost their main resource, the land and on average it was 16.02 *bighas*<sup>9</sup> of land per family at Ghoramara Island. The agricultural land ownership pattern was seriously affected as the land ownership got limited to only 193 (50.66 per cent) families whereas in the past it was 342 (89.76 per cent) families. Loss of land is also a loss of flora and fauna which exists on it. On the other hand, due to continuous flood, the saline water entered into the area and adversely affected the natural fertility of the cultivable lands. This created consecutive destruction of different types of crops, vegetables, betel-vines and also seriously affected the domestication of plants and animals. As a result, their land, agriculture and other sources of the economy got damaged and it affected the economic well-being of the studied people a lot.

Though a major section (52.23 per cent) of families had the involvement in agriculture but due to continuous environmental hazards and soil erosion crop cultivation was being seriously affected and in many cases, they lost their interest in the

agricultural pursuits. The produced crop did not provide sufficient food for the entire family throughout the year. Apart from soil erosion, cyclones, loss of fertility of land due to over-flooded saline water turned out the entire effort of agricultural work in vain. As land is the major resource in a rural economy, loss of land due to soil erosion affects the families in various ways. It was well observed that all the 199 (100 per cent) agriculture practiced families were affected in various ways at Ghoramara Island. All of the said families lost their crop production due to floods caused by the breaking of the embankment and natural calamities. Further, due to soil erosion, 195 (98 per cent) families lost a large amount of agricultural land, even in some cases the total land was eroded and as a result, both the amount of agricultural land and the agricultural productions were largely reduced.

Continuous soil erosion resulted in the gradual degradation of cultivable land and thus, the produced crop from their agricultural land and related earnings were reduced. Besides crop production, agro-based income sources including working scope as daily wage labour in this sector were shrunk to a large extent. Among the studied people only around 25 per cent of families primarily could depend on agriculture. As a result, due to the non-availability of agricultural works only 7.76 per cent of families could depend on day-labor work in settled villages and it was much less at highly eroded Khasimara village (2.60 per cent) than the less eroded Bagpara village (26.56 per cent). But the situation was much better in rehabilitated villages (44.12 per cent), as they had the opportunity to go outside to work. As a whole, the dependency on the agro-based economy was reduced to a great extent. However, the people, who were involved in agriculture, were suffering from a number of problems as primarily their amount of cultivable lands were being reduced due to continuous erosion. Particularly the labourers who were dependant on agricultural works could hardly manage their works and for a considerable period of time, they had no work and earning. Moreover, most of them were suffering from several problems to maintain their minimum livelihood. On account of the shrinkage of working scope in the agricultural

sector, the people tried to survive from the surrounding marine resources including *hilsa* (*Hilsa ilisha*) fishing and later on *meen* (tiger prawn seeds) collection. As an alternative economy, the highest percentage of families (35.70 per cent) primarily depended on fishing. However, the minimum opportunity of fishing was available mainly at Ghoramara Island while at the rehabilitated villages, the scope of fishing and also agriculture was under severe constraints and thus, they were facing multifarious economic problems both in fishing and agriculture.

In the past, mainly during monsoon, there was a huge pressure of freshwater which flowed down from several rivers. Along with other marine fishes particularly the *hilsa* came to this area at that time for reproduction, and thus, their availability was plentiful. But due to environmental changes and might be due to several other man-made causes, the pressure of freshwater during the rainy season was largely reduced vis-à-vis the pressure of saline water got increased. Therefore, those fishes rarely came to the area for their reproduction and as a result, the fishermen were not able to catch the fishes as was possible in the past and it collectively destroyed their major fish-based economy.

Moreover, the people of the studied area mainly depended on agriculture, fishing, day labour work, business etc. And through all the sources the average monthly income of a person was Rs. 357.38 only and daily income was Rs. 11.91. With this poor income, how do they serve their family and particularly to their children in that environmental situation?

**Food, Nutrition and Health:** The several modes of environmental degradation like soil erosion, storm, and over-flooded saline water seriously affected the growth of natural vegetation and crops in the studied area. On the other hand, due to lack of fodder the farm animals were no abler to provide adequate animal protein like milk, egg, meat etc. to the concerned people. Lack of green vegetation, kitchen-garden and decrease of animal protein seriously affected the food and nutrition of the studied people in these islands. All these happened due to environmental reasons primarily. Owing to rapid soil erosion almost all of those ponds/ditches

got eroded. On the contrary, the river embankment got damaged seriously, and due to repeated floods, most of the remaining freshwater sources, ponds/ditches were filled up with saline water. The alternation of salinity in the freshwater decreased the chance to get mostly the locally available freshwater fishes and it directly affected the food and nutrition of the concerned people as a whole.

Considering the food taken by the people, it was noticed that in rehabilitated villages, around 80 per cent of families could manage food with utter hardship and they consumed it with the delicacy of pulses and vegetables rarely. Protein like fish, egg and meat were almost absent in their food. Further, nearly 48 per cent of families could consume food once or rarely twice a day with only rice, salt, chili and infrequently pulses and vegetables. They could procure animal protein very rarely, and breakfast and tiffin were simply mere dreams to them. The situation of settled villages was comparatively better as there were some resources. Due to the lack of natural resources and economic scarcity, most of the people were not in a position to consume food thrice a day. Even regular fulfilment of breakfast and tiffin became a rare delicacy. Most of the studied people including the pregnant women and particularly the children altogether had to face utter constraints to meet their hungriness even sometimes they had to remain on an empty stomach for the whole day.

The concerned people who were once dependent on nature and land to cumulate food and nutrition were facing difficulties. This arrangement could not give them enough opportunity to earn a livelihood and hence they were suffering a lot to maintain their necessary food and nutrition. As a result, many of the people were suffering from various diseases. It was known that many of the studied people of both areas were suffering from waterborne diseases. The intestinal disorder was most prevalent among the studied people. Their poverty hindered them to go through proper medical check-up or adequate pathological examinations and even their simple diseases turned into complex ones in many cases.

The scope and ways of treatment were shrunk from all circumstances for the studied people. Firstly, the soil erosion reduced the scope of earning

from agro-based sources which resulted in an inadequate amount of food available to every member of the society. As there was a scarcity of food the obvious health implications were there. On the other hand, due to the shrinkage of earning sources, people were unable to bear the expense of treatment. In this regard, the rehabilitated people faced problems more. Secondly, due to soil erosion and breaking of the embankment as well as the influx of saline water, the natural vegetation, and production of local fishes and herbal plants were also on the way of wane. Under this situation, the people were also deprived very much of the benefit of herbal medicinal plants and nutritious food sources. Thirdly, due to the problems of isolation from the mainland, it was very difficult particularly for the people of settled villages at Ghoramara Island to avail easy access to modern medical facilities. As a whole, environmental degradation and consequent adverse effect told upon the physical, mental and social health of the studied people and particularly the children were the prime victims of those.

**Dress:** A huge number of studied people were unable to bear the expense of adequate clothing. Basically, they wore very simple types of Bengali clothes. Most of the men and women had only one set of dress, and with such a single clothe they had to pursue their occupational pursuits. Most of the parents could hardly manage adequate school dresses for their children and it ruthlessly told upon the education of the studied people. In the absence of proper dresses particularly students felt disgraced and sometimes they failed to attend school.

**Daily life of the Children:** No doubt the worst victims of the environmental degradation are the children of the families of an area as they are debarred from all the opportunities.

**Case study 1:** Sukumar Dandapath (44 years) a VIII standard educated belonged to Namashudra caste lived at Khasimara village with his nine members' family. By occupation, they depended on agriculture primarily, agricultural labour and *meen* collection secondarily. From all the sources they earned Rs. 2,400/- per month. Their house was eroded twice and seven *bighas* of agricultural land were eroded. They had only one and a half *bighas* of

cultivated land. His children Basanti (14 years), Rajib (12 years), Sanjay (10 years), Subhadra (7 years) read in class III, III, I and I respectively. Except Subhadra all had to do their own agricultural work and also with it Basanti did the domestic chores. They could not attend school regularly. They were also debarred from other infrastructural facilities. Even tuition was irregular. Due to land erosion, their income became reduced. Their parents failed to provide them the required materials. Sometimes Basanti, Rajib and Sanjay also went to the river for catching *meen*. Parents could provide very simple meals twice hardly.

**Case study 2:** Mangala Giri a 13 years aged girl lived at Khasimara village with her ten members' family. They belonged to Maheswa caste. Her father died and then her elder brother, Shib Shankar (36 years) was the head of the family. Their family income was Rs. 1,700/- per month from fishing, agriculture and agriculture labour work. Their fifteen *bighas* of land were eroded and the house was eroded twice. They had the loan of Rs. 5,000/-. Due to environmental reason, they lost their land and income became reduced. Then they had three *bighas* of agricultural land only. But due to flood, salinity and storms, their crops got destroyed. The family could hardly arrange food twice. In this situation, their family could not bear the expense of education. She was forced to stop her education in class VII. To support their family income, she was forced to engage herself in household work primarily, and *meen* collection and agricultural work secondarily.

**Case study 3:** Gouranga Ghoroi (38 years) belonged to Namashudra caste lived with his seven members' family at a rehabilitated village. At Jibantala there was a one-room house, which was insufficient to accommodate seven members. Further, that was ill-constructed and broken too. Parents were unable to provide sufficient food, shelter, and dress to their five children, Kakali (12 years), Shyamali (9 years), Prasun (7 years), Mitali (4 years), Tripti (2 years). Due to rehabilitation his 12 years' daughter, Kakali had to stop her education at class V. All the children were lacking proper food, shelter, dress, education and so on. Their parents could earn hardly Rs. 1,600/- per month by fishing and other sources. Their 30 *bighas* of agricultural

land got eroded and the house was eroded thrice at their native village. With this poor income, they were unable to build another room for accommodation, provide sufficient food, dress for themselves and children too. Due to the loss of land caused by soil erosion, income sources were reduced a lot. Further, alternative income source, fishing was hampered due to rehabilitation at Jibantala where the scope was very limited. Due to erosion of the house, he had to build it again twice at Khasimara by taking a loan. Sometimes they became shelterless and also were unable to provide sufficient daily requirements like food, dress, educational kids and so on to their children. They could arrange food hardly twice. Due to this situation, Kakali had to stop her education and did the domestic chores and looked after her little brother and sisters.

**Case study 4:** Abhiram Mandol (42 years) belonged to Namashudra caste. He had six members' family rehabilitated at Jibantala from Khasimara due to erosion of all agricultural land and house thrice. His two daughters, Trishna (18 years) and Basana (13 years) could not take re-admission at newly rehabilitated village Jibantala. Thus, at an early age, they had to stop their education at class IV and II respectively. Apart from rehabilitation, the alternative economic scope was limited. The overall situation was not well. Parents were unable to provide the required food, shelter, dress and so on. They had to live in a single room house as they had not any capacity to make another room. He could arrange food hardly once or rarely twice. And the quantity and quality of food were also poor as their monthly income was only Rs. 900/- per month by agricultural labour work primarily and fishing secondarily. In the newly rehabilitated village, Jibantala, except very little agricultural labour work, fishing and other income sources were very limited. Thus, there was no scope to earn more. They had a loan of Rs. 6,000/-. Moreover, their children, Trishna (18 years), Sadhana (15 years), Basana (13 years) and Biswajit (11 years) were debarred from all the required basic necessities, food, shelter, dress, education etc. Ultimately their childhood was suffering from various problems.

**Case study 5:** Subodh Mandal (65 years) by caste Maheswa lived with his three members' family

at Jibantala caused by rehabilitation from Khasimara. Their only two *bighas* of agricultural land were eroded and the house was eroded twice at Khasimara. Due to rehabilitation his daughter, Arati stopped her education at class IV. Her aged parents could hardly get any job, and fishing scope was limited there. They could earn hardly Rs. 600/- per month by fishing and agricultural labour work. With this poor income, daily basic needs were not fulfilled. To support family income Arati had to involve in fishing instead of education and other enjoyment at an early age, 10 years. They had a loan of Rs. 4,000/-. They arranged food hardly once or twice, and even sometimes they had to remain in empty stomach.

**Table 2**  
**Family-wise Working Involvement of the Children (5-14 years)**

Village	Involved in work	Not involved in work	Respondent family
Bagpara	98(84.48)	18(15.52)	116(100.00)
Khasimara	23(40.35)	34(59.65)	57(100.00)
Jibantala	31(46.27)	36(53.73)	67(100.00)
Kamalpur	21(61.76)	13(38.24)	34(100.00)
TOTAL	173(63.14)	101(36.86)	274(100.00)

It reveals that the children of 173(63.14%) families between the age group of 5 to 14 years (Table 2) were compelled to do a number of works including daily household chores, fishing/ *meen* collection, tailoring and fuel collection, and sometimes they also helped in different agricultural activities when required.

**Education:** The people were quite aware of the importance of education. 75.17 per cent studied people were literate and it was comparatively better in settled villages (79.77 per cent) than the rehabilitated villages (66.14 per cent). But the educational achievement of both the male (84.41 per cent) and female (93.31 per cent) was mostly confined up to class VIII.

Considering the non-enrollment, it can be revealed that the percentage became doubled among the people of rehabilitated villages than the settled villages and it was more among the females.



**Table 3**  
**School Going Students, Dropout and Non-Enrolled Population**

Village	Male				Female			
	Student	Drop out	Non enrolled	Total	Student	Drop out	Non- enrolled	Total
Bagpara & Khasimara	187	372	81	640	173	254	169	596
	29.22	58.12	12.66	100.00	29.03	42.62	28.36	100.00
Jibantala & Kamalpur	89	141	75	305	76	110	138	324
	29.18	46.23	24.59	100.00	23.46	33.95	42.59	100.00
TOTAL	276	513	156	945	249	364	307	920
	29.21	54.29	16.51	100.00	27.07	39.57	33.37	100.00

(Excluding 0-6 years' age group children)

The same trend was also noted among the school going students where more students were attending school in the settled villages than the rehabilitated villages and in the case of girl students, the percentage was reduced seriously in rehabilitated villages. It was mainly due to their major involvements in diversified occupational pursuits and several other inconveniences related to their daily livelihood. Interestingly higher percentage of

drop out was noted in the settled villages (Table 3). The reality implies that apart from geographical isolation, with their grown-up most of the students gradually engaged themselves in different works to support their family financially rather schooling and thus, stopped education; whereas availing the opportunity of schooling was less at rehabilitated villages.

**Table 4**  
**School Attendant Families and their Level of Support**

Village	School attendance			Private-tuition			
	Regular	Irregular	Respondent family	Regular	Irregular	No	Respondent family
Bagpara & Khasimara	112	57	169	70	27	72	169
	66.27	33.73	100.00	41.42	15.98	42.60	100.00
Jibantala & Kamalpur	44	45	89	11	10	68	89
	49.44	50.56	100.00	12.36	11.24	76.40	100.00
TOTAL	156	102	258	81	37	140	258
	60.47	39.53	100.00	31.40	14.34	54.26	100.00

**Table 5**  
**Family Guidance of the Students**

Village	Family guidance of the male students				Family guidance of the female students			
	Regular	Irregular	No	Respondent	Regular	Irregular	No	Respondent
Bagpara & Khasimara	17	83	87	187	29	63	81	173
	9.09	44.39	46.52	100.00	16.76	36.42	46.82	100.00
Jibantala & Kamalpur	3	12	74	89	3	18	55	76
	3.37	13.48	83.15	100.00	3.95	23.68	72.37	100.00
TOTAL	20	95	161	276	32	81	136	249
	7.25	34.42	58.33	100.00	12.85	32.53	54.62	100.00

Further, if the regular school attendant and private/tutor provided families are considered, the best was observed at settled villages (66.27 per cent and 41.42 per cent respectively), (Table 4). Regular guidance to the students by the family was also better at settled villages (12.78 per cent) than the rehabilitated villages (3.64 per cent), (Table 5). The above situations reflect the interest in education. Though there were some regular school attendants but most of the parents were unable to provide them with the proper educational infrastructure owing to financial constraints caused by environmental degradation. The school-going children of 49.61 per cent of families had working involvement like agriculture, fishing, household work etc. Poverty compelled the students to do various works to help their families with some sort of economic support. An interesting feature may be observed that due to rehabilitation, the dropout of the students from their normal educational courses happened in case of 44.12 per cent families and of the 55 per cent was particularly due to rehabilitation and poverty, and 45 per cent was on account of working involvement due to poverty.

As land was lost, economic support based was adversely affected; people in the rehabilitated villages could not afford to give proper attention to education. On the other hand, due to their resettlement, lack of permanent source of income and adverse the situation of livelihood made them devoid of proper educational infrastructure and ultimately it forced the people to become irregular school attendant (Table 4). Considering the private tuition, in both the situations most of the parents had no capacity and scope to provide it due to deficiency of education and lack of permanent familial economic backbone. As a result, the students were unable to carry on their studies smoothly and regularly.

However, the effect of continuous environmental degradation exerted acute stress on the parents and thus, most of them could not provide minimum attention to their children's education. On the other hand, due to displacement, lack of permanent source of income and adverse situation of livelihood made them devoid of proper educational infrastructure and ultimately it forced the people to become less interested and irregular

school attendant. The inconveniences caused by environmental degradation tremendously affected their educational progress in several ways. Furthermore, the displacement or rehabilitation, acute poverty and other inconveniences altogether caused by environmental degradation adversely affected their entire educational progress.

The environmental degradation reduces the chance of children of the family to be engaged in education, rejoice and merriment. Many of them had no proper shelter and they were immensely absorbed in poverty. Even in many cases, their poor parents could not provide them with the proper dress, sufficient food and proper education for them. So, the childhood of the children was lost. They had to remain in starvation most of the times and hence they had no alternative than to be child worker. To come out from the adverse and poverty-stricken situation the children had no alternative to engage themselves in different works instead of enjoyment of their childhood properly including education, health, food and nutrition, grown-up, socialization, proper personality formation and so on.

*Experiences of Conflict, etc. in Daily Life:* Due to continuous degradation of the land of this area and other natural hazards, they started to lose their economic resources and pursuits rapidly and accordingly different chaos, conflicts were taken place and reached beyond their household confinement and ultimately affected their life.

The political conflict was very intense. The political conflict turned into hurling of bombs and there were a very few cases of bombing in the past but since 1998 it became so frequent that people were terrorized with the same. The intra-familial relations were facing a continuous disturbance, and the chaos, conflicts were on a gradual increase. The study reveals that the cases of domestic violence were increased which touched both women and children. Sometimes it reached to an alarming state. At least in five cases, the wives were beaten to death at Ghoramara Island due to domestic violence. Incidences of poisoning in the ponds, theft, uprooting of different crops were increasing gradually. Apart from different illegal affairs, sometimes they were getting addicted to alcoholism and ultimately these were increasing conflicts and

chaos within the family members and neighbours. These sorts of problems were derived from the scarcity in many respects, mainly resource crunch on account of environmental degradation. As they lost the opportunity to remain occupied with any stable shelter, occupation and so on, they were forced to do such mischievous activities.

This overall situation generated an adverse impact on the children primarily and in the concerned society too. Considering the above fact, mental stress could be observed among the children, family and community members as a whole. Ultimately the children and the people were being socially, physically and psychologically disturbed. As a whole, the entire community became quite anxious and it was well observed in their socio-cultural life.

Sometimes the fishermen and also the people of this locality engaged in several quarrels and conflicts and the children followed the same. In their daily life, the children observed crop destruction, soil erosion, house erosion in the river, uprooting the crops and poisoning the ponds for killing fish. Sometimes quarrels and conflicts reached to an extreme level that they engaged themselves in battering. Even the bombing happened. The children observed this scenario and gathered this experience in their daily life. Apart from these, continuous environmental fluctuation affected their economy, food, shelter, education, social relation and culture which made the children hungry, angry, anxious, frustrated, and so on. The uncertainty created tension and conflict leading to unhappiness. Nature and change and adverse consequences depended on the degree and nature of soil erosion which had a varied influence on the villagers and especially on children.

### ***General Observation and Remarks***

Most of the studied people lost their prime source of income, land. Their houses were eroded several times and even many of them had not any land. Again inflow of saline water in the land ruined the crop for the last several years. Meanwhile, they started to catch *hilsa* fish as an alternative source of the economy but that was affected due to non-availability of fish owing to high salinity. Next, they

moved to *meen* collection and also worked as agricultural labour. But the scope of the collection was largely reduced and then they started to work as day labour. But due to non-availability of work their income was very limited. Thus, a person who owned sufficient *bighas* of land became day labour. However, due to this fact they had to face a lot of problems to maintain the livelihoods of their family members and particularly the children.

It is true that the studied people were the worst victims of the entire consequences. They had to struggle very hard for their survival as there was very mere chance to search for alternative means of economy. They had to face a lot of problems to accumulate their daily livelihood because foremostly environmental degradation seriously affected their economy. Basically, the studied people were the agriculturists and in this regard land was their prime source of earning. But with the rapid soil erosion as well as degradation of land, most of the people lost the source of income meanwhile the people who were unskilled in other sectors rather than agriculture became the worst sufferers. In the past, most of the families had agricultural land but due to continuous erosion of their land and houses, they became almost landless and resource-less which ultimately affected their daily livelihood very much and particularly affected the progress and development of the children in all respects. The production of paddy, fruits, food, other vegetables; local and other flora and fauna including fishes; and the fodder, grass and straw production were also reduced to a great extent, which affected the rearing and growth of farm animal. The production of the animal protein as well as nutritious food became almost impossible. On the other hand, due to their inability to purchasing capacity and also isolation from the mainland told upon their daily feeding. Sometimes many of them had to remain half-fed. Obviously, it was affected by the growth and development of the children very much. Hence, the soil erosion, other natural calamities and environmental changes adversely affected the backbone of the food and nutritional chain of the concerned people.

Family is the social and psychological relief centre and it is the place from where the members

get the assurance of shelter, food, clothes, education and health security. But most of the studied people were not in a position to provide the above requirements to their family members and particularly the children. Due to the economic scarcity and lack of alternatives, most of the children were involved in fishing and other works, even during their school hours by hampering their study schedule and without enjoying their leisure in games and rejoice. The present generation including children had to face acute poverty, hunger, conflicts, chaos, addictions and illegal activities as a part in their daily life. Parents were quite busy in their work and they could not execute enough care to their children. The children became familiar with the surrounding daily inconveniences. They were getting forced to learn the above lessons.

They were always in a fear that at any moment they might fall prey to the grab of those furies of nature and they might lose everything, even their life. Thus, they were in a continuous psychological fear of uncertainty and insecurity and that is why they were always forced to face a challenge that they were almost on the threshold of death and everything of them might be ruined up at any moment which they could neither prevent nor redress. As a result, their enculturation and socialization were quite influenced by the above all circumstances. The above all repeated situations created an acute mental and psychological pressure on them and particularly the children and sometimes it might have turned into a stage of depression.

The children from the very beginning observed illegal affairs, addictions and various strained situations and they grew up in such an environment which affected their socialization process. They could see the distress, depression and disturbances in every aspect of the life of their elders. The entire situation enforced them to become familiar with such activities and the children also learnt similar lessons in the same way, where the children were devoid of the value system very much and mostly they grew up without abiding by social norms, customs and regulations. As a whole, the personality of the children grew up in an acute crisis. It primarily comprised of the situation that they

became competitive in nature, arrogant and aggressive, depressed, jealous and sometimes they tend to get involved in offensive activities. The continuous pressure of insecurity and uncertainty seriously affected their mind. Psychological distress and mental anxiety regarding the existence of life and livelihood were the inseparable part of their personality. From the above all discussion it may be concluded that the adverse environmental impact could be seen on their growing up the pattern, socialization process as well as personality formation.

-Children deserve to live in an environment where good governance and the full enjoyment of human rights are mutually reinforcing. But in the studied area most of the children were debarred from their basic requirements, food, shelter, dress, education and health as well as a grownup. Their grownup was held in the traumatized environment in all respects. Insecurity was everywhere. They did not know that would they get food or be in an empty stomach on that day. They had to fear of house erosion. After displacement or erosion of agricultural land, they did not know where they would take the admission or continue the education and how they would bear the expense of education, dress and treatment too. The family is the prime institution from where the children can get the supports and help but family failed to fulfil the demands and requirements of the children. The physical, social and mental grownups of the children happen in the family but the families were in the disturbing situation. Socialization, personality formation as well as proper growth and development of the children were passing through the stressful, uncertain and unsecured environment. Uncertainty was everywhere. The children failed to enjoy their life. No doubt the basic human rights, security were violated seriously and all were happened due to the environmental reasons.

Children are the building blocks of a nation. If they are provided with the appropriate kind of development, they contribute to the nation's growth in a big way, when they grow old. The future of a nation depends on the quality of socio-economic environment and education that we provide to the children. The children have the rights as human

beings and need special care and protection. They are considered an extremely valuable asset for society. Civilization demands that the society in which life is born would be provided with food, shelter, dress, education, health and security in other aspects until he or she attends youth. But in the studied area, due to destruction of shelter, income sources etc., caused by environmental reason primarily the demands of the civilization were not fulfilled even affected seriously. Children need access to nutrition, basic social services, such as health, education, protection, care etc. to improve their welfare and their capacity. When the land was lost the economy was disturbed when houses were eroded the shelter was affected and all these contributed to uncertainty and instability in their socio-economic life. But considering the issue of environmental degradation including natural calamities, soil erosion, the studied people and particularly the children of the area were in a very alarming condition.

### Notes

1. **Salinity:** A measure of the quantity of dissolved solids in ocean water is salinity. The total salinity of the seawater sample can be determined by measuring only the chloride ion concentration following the relationship - Salinity (ppt) = 1.80655×Chlorinity (ppt). The unit expressed of salinity is parts per thousand or ppt.
2. **Erosion:** The group of natural processes, including weathering, dissolution, abrasion, corrosion, and transportation by which material is worn away from the Earth's surface.
3. **Cyclone:** An atmospheric system characterized by the rapid inward circulation of air masses about a low-pressure centre, usually accompanied by stormy, often destructive weather. Cyclones circulate counterclockwise in the Northern Hemispheres and clockwise in the Southern Hemisphere.
4. **Mouza:** A mouza is the geographical expression of a unit of landmass for revenue settlement and revenue collection, whereas, the village is a human settlement within a mouza with strong social bond. Within a mouza there can be thus more than one village. And, at the same time there can be even one village belonging to two contiguous mouzas.
5. **Climate:** The metrological conditions, including temperature, precipitation and wind that characteristically prevail in a particular region: the long-term average of weather.
6. **Farakka Barrage:** It was completed in 1974-75. The Farakka Barrage is a dam on the river The Ganges located

in the Indian state of West Bengal. The dam was built to divert the Ganges River water into the Hooghly River. It has 101 gates and it serves water to the Farakka super thermal power station (NTPC Farakka). The diversion has raised salinity levels, contaminated fisheries, hindered navigation, and posed a threat to water quality and public health. Lower levels of soil moisture along with increased salinity have also led to desertification.

7. **Bagpara** village was one of the six villages under Ghoramara Island/mouza/Gram Panchayat. At that time 55.01 per cent area of the total mouza was washed out. But land erosion of any of the six villages of the mouzas was not mentioned separately. But it was observed that some portion of the Bagpara village was eroded.
8. In earlier **Khasimara** itself was a mouza of 9.65 km<sup>2</sup> (1922-1923) area of land and village too under Ghoramara Gram panchayat. But due to continuous erosion 96.89 per cent (1992) area of its original extension was washed away in the sea and the existing part was too endangered considering the facts of its vulnerability. Even then the Government authority officially did not mention the existence of the mouza anywhere and declared the mouza was completely eroded. But 77 families were still living in the Khasimara Village.
9. **Bigha:** The unit of land measure is the *bigha*, which varies from one-third of an acre to almost one acre. The government-standardized *bigha* in West Bengal is 14,400 square feet, which equals 1,333.33 square meters or roughly one-third of an acre.

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