

ABHIROOP CHOWDHURY AND
ARMIN ROSENCRANZ

Of cyclones and the tigers of Sundarbans

Cyclone 'Yaas' devastated vast tracts of the Indian Sundarbans on 26 May 2021, breaking the vulnerable earthen dams along the river-banks and flooding the islands with salt water. The devastation amounted to an estimated Rs 15,000 crore in the state of West Bengal, according to government sources. 'Yaas' has also impacted the wildlife of the Sundarbans as much as it has disrupted human lives.

The Sundarbans region is also home to 96 mangrove tigers. The region is protected by the Tiger Project, the nearby National Park and the largest Ramsar wetland conservation site of India.

Tigers have five sub-species living within eastern and south-east Asia. These are the Royal Bengal Tiger, the Indochinese Tiger, the Siberian (Amur) Tiger, the South China Tiger and the Sumatran Tiger. The Royal Bengal Tiger has the largest wild population amongst all these sub-species.

Sundarbans tigers have unique behavioral and adaptation traits, unlike tigers of other parts of south-east Asia. Tigers are territorial. Male tigers mark spaces with pheromones and violently guard their territory from rivals. The Sundarbans have diurnal tidal regimes where the mangrove forested islands are washed by tidal waters at least twice a day. This makes marking of territories difficult.

Tigers of the Sundarbans can augment their diet with fish and crabs. They can swim with an estimated speed of 13 km/hr. Sundarbans tigers can climb trees, drink salty water, hunt in daylight and prey upon humans. These preying behaviours are different from other members of this species. A scientific study indicates that these tigers have smaller, lighter frames than others because of their ability to swim and climb trees. There is a dearth of fresh water in these islands and tidal waters contain around 1.5 per cent salt. Drinking salty water makes the tigers suffer from liver and kidney problems. This also makes them more irritable and aggressive.

Human-tiger conflict is a reality in the Sundarbans. These deltaic islands are unsuitable for human habitation. This discouraged the colonization of these islands by humans until the 18th century. During the British colonial empire, large tracts



of mangrove forest were cleared for agriculture. Eventually, 54 out of 102 islands became inhabited by humans.

Governmental sources report around 10 tiger attacks on humans each year. Villagers claim that at least 10 people die due to tiger attacks each month. Reports indicate that between 1985 and 2009, approximately 789 persons were attacked by tigers. Twenty per cent of these attacks occur in the pre-monsoon month of April. This situation gets more dire during flooding or cyclones, when tigers can easily swim up to the villages inundated by water.

One of the main reasons behind the under-reporting of tiger attacks is the tiger migration into the forest

without the knowledge of forest authorities. According to Joint Forest Management plans, villagers around the Sundarbans reserve forests can apply and get passes to collect non-timber forest products. Even fishing vehicles operating around the reserved forests require passes for their entry. The majority of the local people depend on fishing and honey collection. Both of these trades risk tiger attacks. There are villages dotted across the Sundarbans housing 'tiger widows.' They are the women who lost their husbands to tiger attacks.

To prevent tiger migration into the villages, the forests are separated with nylon nets. This acts as a psychological barrier to the tiger, reduc-

ing tiger sightings in the nearby villages. In spite of the nets, old tigers or pregnant tigresses do enter villages to access easy prey. Face masks are worn on the back of the head by the villagers entering tiger-occupied forests. These masks confuse the tigers as they are behaviorally tuned to attack unsuspecting prey.

Tigers are well known for their camouflaged hunting which makes them almost invisible. Their padded feet muffle all sounds, their claws stay retracted inside their paws until required for hunting and their black stripes amongst yellow coat colour makes them virtually invisible amidst straw-colored mangrove palms.

Conflict scenarios add to the fear surrounding tigers in the Sundar-

bans. Natural disasters always result in more human-tiger conflicts in this region. After super-cyclone Amphan on 20 May, 2020, eight tiger attacks were reported. 'Yaas' has just hit the islands, which may result in similar tiger attacks.

Tiger conservation is impossible without the support of the local population. Authorities must take special care to limit post disaster tiger-human interaction, minimizing the chances of human-tiger conflicts. Understanding the unique behaviour of the Sundarbans tigers is crucial in managing such conflicts.

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NOW AND AGAIN

Back to the cycle

BUDDHADEV NANDI

Learning how to ride a bicycle is not simple for an adult. However, nearly every adult can learn to ride a bicycle if he or she possesses qualities such as patience, persistence, dedication and of course enthusiasm for the task.

I have heard from many people who learnt to drive buses, trains, trucks etc. that learning how to ride a bicycle is harder. It is perhaps the only vehicle, though seemingly very humble to look at, that requires body balance on the part of the rider.

I know many people who can drive motorbikes without riding bicycles ever. Many of them confess candidly that they are afraid of riding bicycles lest they fall down. It is generally said if one knows how to ride a bicycle, one will learn to drive a motorbike easily but not vice versa.

I learnt to ride after my graduation. Unlike early learners, I had to skip the half-pedal stage, an important step that enables one to possess control. Naturally, getting off and getting down from a running bicycle seemed too formidable a challenge. The challenge proved too much for me because of my short height.

After a few days I gained confidence and became adept in coordinating the handle, brake levers, pedals and even the bell of the bicycle reflexively.

Balancing the body only on the left leg in a running bicycle slightly inclined on the right is the most difficult part of riding. Like most other late learners, I sat on the saddle while the bicycle was stationary.

I learnt how to ride a bicycle on the sprawling ground of Mission High School. I would circle the ground several times triumphantly. I was confident that I had possessed sufficient control over my bicycle. What was more serendipitous was that I did not get hurt while learning.

Then came the final stage. I took out my bicycle one morning to ride on the road. To my utter surprise, my hands were trembling when I had to apply my power of anticipation to ride through a crowd or a pack of pariah dogs.

But I was bewildered and horrified, when my speeding bicycle slid on a curve covered with red gravel. I badly bruised my entire left side, including my limbs and even my unattractive countenance. My pain doubled when a group of teenage boys laughed out seeing my inability to control the bicycle. One of them came forward and advised me that I should have applied brakes to cut the speed before turning. The lesson proved useful in my life.

The price of petrol per litre in our town has almost touched the summit of Rs. 100. Therefore, after a long gap, with my full conviction to the popular saying that if one learns to swim or ride a bicycle once, he will never forget, I wrestled out my old bicycle from under the staircase. It needed extensive repair and had to be admitted to the nearest bicycle repairing centre named "Cycle Hospital" a few yards from my house.

To my utter astonishment, the mechanic made my bicycle quite fit for riding as before except for its complexion. Now I do the best part of my outdoor chores on my bicycle instead of my motorbike. Besides the savings, it gives me the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of doing some physical exercise regularly.

100 YEARS AGO

THE HIDE TRADE

To The Editor Of The Statesman
SIR, - A few days ago there was a letter in The Statesman saying the Germans were trying to get the monopoly of the hide trade. As long as the Germans did the hide trade it was a flourishing business, but since the English firms in Calcutta are pretending to buy hides, the hide trade is ruined. There are lakhs of hides stacked in the Calcutta market and no buyers and all are ruined stock now and Government has also dealt the trade a crushing blow by imposing a 15 per cent tax on all exports. The result is that no foreign buyers come. Formerly America, France and Italy used all to buy but from the time of the 15 per cent tax none of these foreign buyers comes. Thus the English Calcutta firms are getting very careful to keep the monopoly of the hides. A walk to the hide market will show the state it is in.
A HIDE DEALER.
Purneah.

AMPTHILL COMMITTEE & BENGAL COUNCIL

To The Editor Of The Statesman
SIR, - Your article in this morning's Statesman deprecating the formation of the Emergency Committee in England has an illuminating commentary in the action of the Bengal Council within the last few days in cutting down the grant for the Police, and in upsetting the arrangements in progress for partitioning of the Mymensingh and Midnapur districts, showing the absence of all sense of responsibility for law and order and efficient administration. It was, of course, to be expected and it would be unwise at present to say much about it. We have to trust our Governor to take the necessary steps to preserve sanity and good sense in his Government. But surely it is a relief to know that there are some men who know the truth and are trying to instill it into the ignorant public at Home. It is wiser always to face unpleasant truths than to ignore them and let things drift.
SENEX.
Calcutta.

POLITICAL DIARY | KALYANI SHANKAR

What is Mayawati's future in UP?

The BSP supremo and four-time Uttar Pradesh chief minister Mayawati might have lost her political glamour but the game is not over. She was once dreaming of becoming the prime minister but her party's gradual slide makes one question whether she will be relevant in U.P.?

Mayawati is coming into focus because of the Assembly polls in early 2022. There are doubts about Mayawati's politics because she has gone into a shell since the 2019 polls and has not come out of her bungalow. The other parties like the BJP, SP, and even Congress have begun their poll preparations but the BSP's future is not known.

Rumours are afloat that Mayawati is yet to make up her mind whether she wants to reclaim her position in the opposition turf. With the gradual slide of the BSP, the other political parties in the state are eyeing the Dalit space opening up before the 2022 polls. Moreover, the BSP has not been visible in the controversial mass movements like the anti-CAA protests, vaccine controversy or farmer's protests, etc.

Her famous social engineering of the Dalits, Muslims and Brahmin in 2007 is not there anymore because in the last few years a substantial chunk of Dalits, particularly the Jatavs (Mayawati's caste) have shifted to BJP. The Priyanka Gandhi-led Congress in UP is also eyeing the Dalits. Muslims have been divided between the Samajwadi Party, the BSP and the Congress. Brahmins are back with the BJP. So unless she manages to get back her core support she will not succeed. In the recent Panchayat



polls, the SP did well, followed by the BJP and the BSP came a distant third.

Mayawati has kept her cards close to her chest. With the latest expulsions, the number of BSP MLAs has been reduced to 11 from 19. She has also announced that her party will go it alone in the 2022 polls. "While our votes are easily transferred to the alliance partners, the latter's votes are not...we have suffered from electoral alliances in the past...we have therefore decided to go it alone in the next year's UP Assembly polls," the BSP supremo declared recently.

Since then, in many political positions she appears to favour the ruling BJP at the Centre and the state

The BSP's slide in the past decade has been gradual. In the 2012 UP Assembly election, the party secured nearly 26 per cent vote share, down from 30 per cent in 2007. But in the 2017 polls, this fell to 22 per cent and dropped further to 19.3 per cent in the 2019 Lok Sabha election. The party won 20 Lok Sabha seats in 2009, nil in 2014 and 10 in 2019. Significantly a month after the results were declared, Mayawati had called off the alliance with the SP.

Since then, in many political positions she appears to favour the ruling BJP at the Centre and the state

resulting in the opposition calling her party the BJP's B team. The question is whether Mayawati will support the BJP, overtly or covertly. After all, the BSP has had a long history of political alliances — both pre-poll and post-poll - with the Congress, BJP, and SP.

Mayawati needs to understand the changing world since the outbreak of Covid and change her strategy according to the new situation. Her challenges are many. The first is whether she could take advantage of the disenchantment of Brahmins with the BJP. The BSP had managed to get 30 per cent of the Brahmin vote

in the 2007 Assembly polls.

Secondly, with social media gaining ground in communication, she must strengthen the party's profile on the social media platform.

Thirdly, there is the emergence of new players like Chandrashekhar Azad who are eyeing Dalit votes. Azad, the Dalit youth leader, is already claiming to be the future leader of the Dalit-Bahujan movement in Uttar Pradesh. His Bhim Army is posing a threat to the BSP in Western U.P. Azad will face his first test in the 2022 polls. For the BSP, splintering the Dalit votes is not a solution.

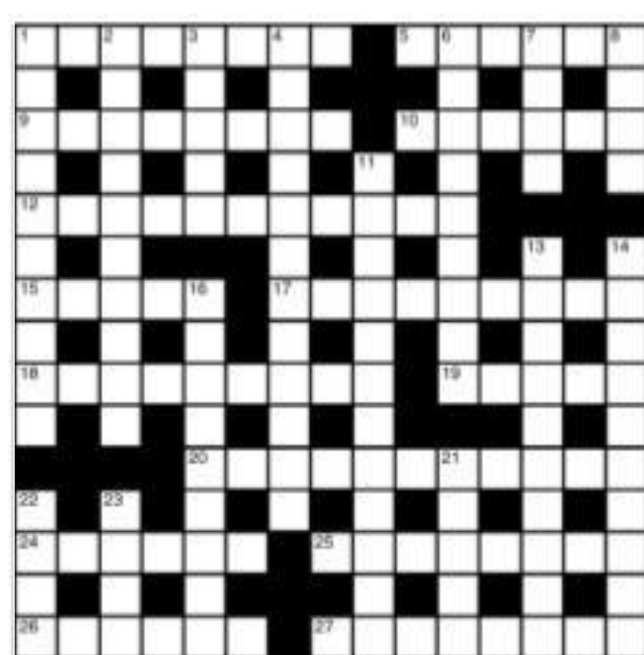
Fourthly, the BSP has lost almost all the leaders groomed by party founder Kanshiram. Some are dead and others have been shunted out. The result is that there are no popular, second-rung leaders today. Many prominent faces of the BSP have also joined the rival Samajwadi Party and more shifts are expected.

Fifthly, Mayawati is perceived to be soft on the BJP. She now considers the SP as her main rival. She has declared recently that she would go to any length to defeat the SP even if it meant supporting the BJP. However, when eyebrows were raised she quickly amended this statement and clarified she would rather retire than support the BJP.

U.P. elections are important as it is the biggest state. A divided opposition will result in a multi-cornered fight. This will be beneficial to the BJP. Mayawati needs a new narrative. But it is too early to predict as elections are eight months away. Mayawati can keep her options open for the post-poll scenario provided she keeps her flock together and adds more voters.

CROSSWORD

NO 28941



SOLUTION FOR 06 JUNE



ACROSS

- Piece of tin object in the distance (8)
- Fish-eater laying egg by small quarry (6)
- Died by backing into landowner's Beetle (8)
- Bring over shrimp or tuna sandwiches (6)
- Before flight pester poorly fier (4,7)
- Cable carrier left bitten by heartless snake (5)
- Parent circles pub, beginning to enter drunk state ... (9)
- ... we sither nervously past (9)
- All sent one quiz, essentially it's boredom (5)
- Smooth Conservative reclines in front of harbour (5-6)
- Stockings worn by old Sugar (6)
- Deplorable failing in aim to access credit line (8)
- Rug from East Estonia is most dull (6)
- Around noon, yawners slipped home for a bevy (8)

DOWN

- Writer handled upset resident of 27 (4-3,3)
- Wandering heifer ultimately not for the dairy? (10)
- The homeless lout really making a turnaround (5)
- Author's poster of a French region (6,6)
- Mark stops wee horse running to another place (9)
- See 22
- Beast in range they say is still on top of ice (4)
- Copies princess reportedly penned for her brother (6,6)
- Agreed plan working on new vaccine (10)
- Time on island in March with good reason (10)
- Bulletins broadcast caws filling roosts (9)
- Kind of sound intermittently faint (5)
- Tom in Paris maybe set up secure online space (4,4)
- King mislaid crown before midday inspection (4)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)

