The Tainted Tide

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The sun had long gone down and the moon too seemed to have taken the night off. The narrow creek, in which our boat had dropped anchor for the night, was alive with an amazing variety of nocturnal sounds—continuous chizz of crickets, the languorous hum of mosquitoes, a gecko calling nonstop into the night and rising above everything, the slap-slapping of a rising tide rapping against the sides of our boat. We were in the heart of the Sunderbans, the largest remaining unbroken stretch of mangrove forests in the world. When the monsoon storms well up and all hell breaks loose, it is these mangroves which act as natural shield, protecting the mainland from the rising seas. These dense, almost impenetrable estuarine forests are home to an amazing range of flora and fauna—dolphins, otters, Olive Ridley turtles, to name a few.

Later in the night, drifting in deep slumber, I heard the dull humming of our boat engine. I checked my watch and realized that it was only 03.30 hours in the morning. “Why were we pulling anchor at this odd hour and where were we off to?” I shot out of the cabin and asked Alam, our boatman.

He explained that the tide had begun recede and he planned to travel towards the sea with the tides. On reaching the estuary, he would drop anchor and cast his fishing net in anticipation of a plentiful catch.
“During high tide, large shoals of fish move from the deep water of the sea towards the shallow water of shore.” Alam explained.

And so our little boat headed in the direction of the sea in the indigo of the night.

It was an amazing experience- sitting on the deck under the stars with the sinister but silky waters silently snaking underneath. A thick dark fog hung sullenly about us. Occasionally, a dinghy would row quietly by, unseen until it was almost upon us.

Suddenly, our little boat abandoned the centre of the river and sharply veered towards the left shore.

“Look!” Alam exclaimed. A ship, the size of a three-storey building, emerged out of the fog like an ancient monster. Some distance behind it, hanging on the horizon, loomed another. And another. And another. They kept coming, massive cargo ships, noisily churning through the Sundarbans, destroying the quiet peace of the night and many other things as I realized later.

Alam shook his head in concern. In such poor visibility, we would stand no chance if our boat fell in the path of any of the massive ships.

“But why were these monsters wandering in the midst of the Sundarbans, a UNESCO World Heritage Site?” I asked Alam, who explained with a deep sigh that due to the regular shipping channels getting silted, this had become more of a routine these days. Ships carrying oil, fertilisers, pesticides, insecticides, fly ash, coal and cement routinely slice the channels of this fragile ecosystem every day, each a recipe for a potential disaster.
Next morning, in the harvest gathered from the sea, I spotted a shrimp without any eyes and with a weird reddish lump on its back. It was clearly evident that something was terribly wrong with the creature. When I showed it to Alam, he sadly nodded his head and said that exactly a month ago, (that is on December 9, 2014) a ship carrying furnace oil for a thermal power plant had capsized not very far from the spot where we were now. The accident had led to the spilling of the ship’s entire cargo (3, 50,000 litres of furnace oil) in the Sela river, thereby poisoning this fragile, unique environment.

“Since then, we frequently come across fish with unusual lesions, lumps and strange black streaks.” Alam lamented.

After the fishing expedition, as we travelled back to the shore, I hung over the deck rails, minutely observing the Sela River.

Almost a month had passed since the spill; still the oil could clearly be seen, graded by thickness from black to brown and then all colours of the rainbow.

The thinner films of oil were spread all over the surface of water like a superfine net, while the inky viscous heavy fuel oil stuck to the margins of the river where the forest stood ankle deep in low tide. The black tar socks on the tree trunks were clearly visible. The line of high-tide had turned into the oil-line.

I had been to the Sunderbans in the January of 2015 and witnessed the after effect of one disaster. And now, barely three months ago (March 19, 2016 to be exact) I read in the newspapers that a large cargo vessel called Sea Horse carrying 1,245 metric tons of coal, had capsized in the Sundarbans.
Sitting thousands of miles away, I can easily visualize the impact and lament our callous ways which is irreversibly destroying the precious and fragile ecosystem. In addition to the large amount of coal, hundreds of gallons of fuel oil, batteries and other toxic contaminants will be now polluting the river waters and slowly spreading out into the Bay of Bengal.

Unsuspecting tigers swimming these channels will struggle for breath. The fish, migrating upstream to spawn, will get severely impacted, leading to the emergence of fish with disturbing deformities such as fish with weird lumps. Crabs, from a fresh bright pink will turn a viscous black and many of them might even lose their claws. Kingfishers diving into the polluted waters for their lunch will come up with their feathers coated with oil, which will penetrate into the plumage and destroy the feather's insulating capabilities. The bird might eventually even die of hypothermia.

Sundarbans Delta is the sanctuary for two globally vulnerable dolphins’ species, the sweet-water Irawaddy and the brackish-water Ganges dolphins. Many of these marine creatures that frequently need to come up for air, will also end up as victims of the oil spill. Unable to rise past the congealed layer of oil for the breath of life, they will get suffocated with the oily water coating their blowholes and getting into their lungs. The shores of the numerous islands dotting the delta will be strewn with carcasses of otters, lizards, turtles and birds. Most of the dead might simply sink to the bottom of the rivers and seas, invisible victims of this enormous environmental folly. The legacy will continue decades later with oil residues surfacing in the animal population and on the mudflats, sea beds, beaches – in a nutshell, everywhere.
Amidst all these, the rhythm of the tides will continue, unabated. Every day, twice a day, the oil-tainted tide will rush inland hundreds of kilometres and wash out again. Up, and down, and up, and down. This cadence of the tides will slosh the oil across the innumerable khals (creeks) in the Sunderban delta. The trees of the mangrove forests typically deal with submergence during high tide by sprouting aerial roots called snorkels that stay above the water to breathe. These snorkels, lifelines of trees, will now be smothered in oil. With their roots suffocated, the mangroves will choke and gasp for breath and eventually die out—and in this place of ever-shifting sands and tides, it is the tenacious mangroves that hold the land together.

Sundarbans, which when translated into Bengali (the local language) means “beautiful forest” (Sundar = beautiful, ban = forest). These mesmerising mangroves are clearly on the road to extinction - shrinking and sinking with each passing day. Is anyone listening?
Reflection

I happened to visit the Sunderbans in the winter of 2015 with my parents. A vacation into the heart of the world’s largest mangrove forest turned into an environmental eye opener as I got to witness the after effects of a recently happened oil spill. The incident opened my eyes to the fragility of our ecosystem. I realized that most of the times, the damages done to the oceans and seas sink under the water and might not be easily visible like the garbage dumps on land. But the damages manifest themselves in diverse devastating ways, adversely impacting the health of the earth and its inhabitants.

Oil spill is one of the most conspicuous forms of damage to the marine environment and associated ecosystems. The sources of oil spill are many—human error or carelessness, faulty equipment, deliberate acts of terrorism or vandalism by warring countries, illegal dumping of virgin or waste oil into the high seas and oceans, etc. What, however is common to all of them is the fact that the contamination and damage caused by oil spill takes a long, long time to be cleaned up and in most of the times, in spite of best efforts, traces still remain.

Responsibility for the prevention of oil spills falls upon individuals as well as on governments and industries. Because, whatever be the source of or cause for an oil spill, the consequences are catastrophic and ultimately impact everyone on the planet.