

## Ethnic Identity and Forest Preservation: A Sociological Enquiry on Sundarbans, West Bengal

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### Abstract

Sundarbans is a world Heritage site. It is an abode of thousands of animals and trees. The mangrove forest is the source of livelihood of the inhabitants of Sundarbans. Their dependence on the forest is historical. Through generations, they have built this 'we-feeling' as forest-dwellers. Their unique way of life is preserved in their cultural traits. 'Bonbibi' myth is one of the examples where the forest life of Sundarbans is portrayed adequately. The strong ethnic feelings lead to the preservation of mangrove forests of Sundarbans as these people think that they have nothing beyond this forest. Now-a-days, they are promoting plantation of trees through collective action. Along with this, Govt. initiatives have helped to improve the preservation of mangrove forests of Sundarbans. The environment makes their life vulnerable and this vulnerability binds them together. Unitedly, they fight with everyday problems. This physical unity brings cultural bonding. The mangrove forest is a companion to their struggle. This natural connection between human and forest promotes the sense of preservation among the human being. For this present study, qual-quantum method has been adopted. Both, secondary data and primary data have been used for this present study. Primary data has been collected through interview method.

**Keywords:** Ethnic Identity, Mangrove Forest, Preservation, Sundarbans.

### Introduction

Geo-social aspect is responsible for our livelihood. Our environment makes us the way we are. The mangrove forest of West Bengal, the Sundarbans plays a pivotal role in the life of the inhabitants. These people depend on the natural resources of the mangrove forest. This dependency makes a strong bond between these people and the world heritage site, the Sundarbans. Through generations, they recognise themselves as forest-dweller. The Sundarbans is a unique forest in many ways, it is the only mangrove wetland tiger habitat in the world (WWF, 2010), it is an abode of crocodiles, buffaloes, cats, deer, sharks, Gangetic dolphins, snakes, red crabs etc. (Sarkar, 2010). On the one hand, the inhabitants have to fight with environment for the survival as well as they have to depend on the environment for their sustenance. This livelihood reflects in their

culture through their songs, art, religions and myths. Their identity cannot be isolated from the forest. Though initially during the British rule, the British men encouraged to clear out the forest for making human habitat (Chakrabarti, 2009) but gradually people realised the importance of forest in their life and inclined on preservation. The present paper tries to find the connection between the ethnic identity of the inhabitants and the preservation of the mangrove forest of the Sundarbans.

### Objectives

The major objectives of this paper are-

To explore the ethnic identity of the inhabitants of the Sundarbans

To analyze how this ethnic identity is linked with the mangrove forests

To find out whether this ethnic identity has any effect on forest preservation of the Sundarbans

### **Methodology**

For this present study, qual-quantum method has been adopted. The researchers have relied on both primary and secondary data for the study. For secondary data, an influx of secondary sources have been reviewed, analyzed and relevant data have been incorporated in the study. Primary data has been collected from fifty respondents of Uttar Haripur village and Patibunia village, Namkhana block, South 24 Parganas. Purposive sampling has been used. Those who are dependent on the forest for their livelihood are selected as respondents. Data has been collected through interview method.

### **Review of Literature**

#### Human Settlement in the Sundarbans

There are some disagreements among the scholars regarding the settlement in the Sundarbans. Some scholars said that scattered human settlement was there in the Sundarbans during 8<sup>th</sup> century and a theory of depopulation of the Sundarbans in the Middle Ages was prominent. Various reasons have been forwarded like earthquakes that led to a sudden subsidence of the land, attacks carried out by Portuguese and Arakans, and a hostile environment (Ghosh, 2015). From A. D. 1200, sufi holy men cleared the forests of the northern and eastern part of the delta and introduced agriculture (Eaton, 1993). Some other scholar said that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, "Sundarbans rivers were inhabited in semi-permanent ways by fishermen, woodcutters, pirates, paddy cultivators and salt makers who lived on boats" (Jalais, 2010). Though there are debates on the timing of first settlements, permanent human habitation was enabled through the clearing of the forest that started in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and continued through to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The British collector general Clod Russell planned to divide the forest land into plots and lease them out to landlords in 1771. Poor farming communities from various parts of Bengal as well as from neighbouring states (presently Odisha, Bihar,

Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh) were encouraged by these lease-holding landowners to settle in the Sundarbans. The forests were cleared by these people for developing the land. Clearing of forest began a decade after and was initiated by Tillman Henkel, the then Magistrate of Jessore district, presently in Bangladesh. This is the history of human settlement in a nutshell (Centre for Science and Environment, 2012).

#### Ethnic Identity of the People of the Sundarbans

##### Occupations, Nature and Folk Culture

The largest mangrove forests in the world, the Sundarbans is an abode of the Royal Bengal Tiger, snakes, crocodiles and other animals which make it a dangerous area for the human being. People are struggling daily there to make out a living and they are always in fear and anxiety for survival. The popular occupations of the Sundarbans are cultivation, honey collection, fishing etc. Honey collection is a risky occupation as sometime the honey collector or moule becomes the victim of the tiger. Often, these kinds of tragedies are happening in the Sundarbans that an entire village has come to be known as bidhobaar gram or Village of Widows. Fishers in the rivers are also not in comfort. Along with storms, they have another anxiety, crocodiles. The female family members, back at home, "perform the kumirbrata, a folk ritual aimed at appeasing the giant reptiles" (Sarkar, 2010). We can see a unique occupation, Tiger Charmer or bauley. The tiger charmer is believed to have the ability to control tigers. The tiger charmers have to follow 'Islamic Rules' like not entering the forests in Fridays (jumma), prohibiting themselves from eating pork or crab, refraining themselves from lending or borrowing money with interest. Mainly the honey collectors appoint them while going to the forests. The tiger charmers have the toughest role of 'negotiating between groups of humans and non-humans' (Jalais, 2010).

#### **The Punthi Literature**

To know about the early days of Sundarbans, one has to depend on the punthi.

The punthi literature of lower deltaic Bengal focused on gods and goddesses of the Sundarbans. The literature reflects the elements of the Sundarbans. The theme of the literature is the 'struggle between humanity and nature'. Punthi literature talked about the marginal sections of the population. "Their beliefs stood apart from mainstream Hinduism and Islam" (Basu, 1966).

Folk religion which is represented by local syncretic cults has a distinctive existence of its own. Woodcutters, honey gatherers, beeswax gatherers, boat builders and desperate cultivators believe in the gods and goddesses of this folk religion (Jalil). The man in the forest can 'identify himself' with these deities. The original source of religion is fear. Human beings worship those which they fear most. The inhabitants of the Sundarbans are not exceptional in this. The most ferocious animal in the Sundarbans is the Royal Bengal Tiger. The central focus in the punthi is the man's struggle against wild animals, especially tigers. The tiger is considered in one hand as 'monstrous foe' and a 'subordinate deity' on the other hand (Sarkar, 2010).

According to Hunter, almost all the inhabitants are 'either Hindus or Muslims'. The Hindus are mainly from the Sudra castes: Napit, Kaibarta, Pod, Chandal, Jalia, Tior, Dhoba, Jogi, Suri and Kaora. There are different categories among Muslims also: Shaikhs, Sayyids, Pathans (Hunter, 1973). These people have to depend on the forest for their livelihood. They have to survive through the struggle with the nature. Risk is like a permanent companion in their life so they look for solutions in religious beliefs (Jana, 1984).

These folk cults are described in the texts (punthi): the Raimangal was about the tiger god, Dokkhin Rai, written by Krishna Ram Das in 1686, the Ghazi-Kalu-Champavati-Kanyarpunthi was written by Abdur Rahim (the date of composition is unknown), the Banabibi Jahuranama was about the lady of the forest, Bonbibi, was composed by Banayuddin in 1877. There was a different version of this tale entitled as Banabibi Jahuranama, written by Marhum Munshi Muhammad Khater in 1287 B.S., Kartik, i.e. 1880 (Sarkar, 2010).

Briefly, we will discuss about the two deities.

### **Dokkhin Rai**

Dokkhin Rai is known as the lord of the tigers and is worshipped in the Sundarbans. There are several stories regarding the Dokkhin Rai. In one of the stories, Dokkhin Rai is considered as the son of the Shiva. "The head of the Ganesha when severed from his body fell in the southern (or dokkhin) direction to become a deity" (Basu, 1966). In another story (Banabibi Jahuranama), Dokkhin Rai is believed as the demon king of the forests (Ghosh, 2004).

### **Bonbibi**

Bonbibi is the deity of the forests, protector of the all. It is a unique thing related to Bonbibi is that both Hindu and Muslims people believe in her divine powers. Though both religious communities worship her but there are differences in their rituals. Muslims call her 'Bonbibi' and for Hindus, she is 'Bonodebi' (Roy, 2007). Muslims create the idol of Bonbibi as a young girl of a Muslim family, they offer her red flags. Hindus worship her as a mother goddess, leaving offerings before clay likenesses. In both cases, the idol is ornamented with wild flowers and creepers on her head and neck which signify her deep roots to the wild forests (Mitra, 1923). This shared worship is not a simple equation but reflects something else: a shared dependence on the forest and a very practical need for protection (Uddin, 2011). The inhabitants of the Sundarbans do not think Bonbibi as an 'elite deity' of a temple or a mosque. Instead of that, she is considered as part of their hard lives where religious differences are meager and the struggle of life is significant (Jana, 1984).

### **Govt. Initiatives towards Preservation of Forest**

Indian Constitution has given important to environment protection. Under the directive principles which is part of the Indian Constitution states that the States are duty bound to protect and improve the environment and safeguard the forests and wildlife and it is a duty of every citizen to

protect and improve the national environment including forests, lakes, rivers and wildlife, and to have compassion for living creatures (Mahadebia, 2012(?)). There are several laws such as Indian Forest Act, 1927; Environmental Protection Act, 1986; National Green Tribunal Act, 2010 that have been enacted by the Indian Govt. for the protection of environment (Table 1).

For the protection of the mangrove forests of the Sundarbans, numerous initiatives have been taken. A conservation timeline of Sundarbans:

1973: The first conservation effort takes off, with the setting up of the Sundarban Tiger Reserve.

1987: Sundarbans receives recognition as a World Heritage Site.

1989: The government constitutes the Sundarban Biosphere Reserve.

2001: The UNESCO recognizes the Reserve under its Man and Biosphere (MAB) Programme.

2001: The Sundarban Biosphere Reserve is nominated a Ramsar site. (Centre for Science and Environment)

**Table 1**

List of Indian Laws regarding Environmental Policies

Name	Year
Indian Forest Act	1927
Wild Life (Protection) Act	1972
Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act	1974
Forest (Conservation) Act	1980
Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act	1981
Environment Protection Act	1986
The Motor Vehicles Act	1988
Biodiversity Act	2002
Wild Life (Protection) Amendment Act	2002
National Green Tribunal Act	2010

Source: Mahadebia, K. and Vikas, M. "Climate Change – Impact on the Sundarbans: A Case Study". International Scientific Journal Environmental Science, 2012(?), <http://environment.scientific->

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### Analysis and Discussion

The Story of Bonbibian Forest Preservation in the Sundarbans:

The myth of Bonbibian has an impact on the forest preservation of the Sundarbans. Briefly, we will discuss the story of Bonbibian then we will explain the connection with forest preservation. The story of Bonbibian is follows:

A man named Ibrahim live in Medina. Ibrahim was blessed with twins, Bonbibian and Shahjongoli. Those children had been chosen for a divine mission. For completing this mission they were to travel from Arabia to 'the country of eighteen tides' (athherobhatirdesh) and made it fit for human habitation. The jungles of 'the country of eighteen tides' were the realm of a powerful demon king, Dokkhin Rai. When Bonbibian and Shahjongoli came to this country, Dokkhin Rai heard their azan (Muslim call for prayer) and he called them for battle but the merciful Bonbibian decided it peacefully. She divided the country into two halves- one half for the wilderness and it will be ruled by Dokkhin Rai and other half for the human settlement where she will rule.

In 'the country of eighteen tides' there lived a man called Dhona who collected ships for searching wealth in the forests. There was a little boy named Dukhey with the crew member. After setting off, they reached to an island named 'Kedokhalir Char'. This island was in the realm of Dokkhin Rai. In that night, Dhona saw Dokkhin Rai in his dream, Dokkhin Rai told that he want the little boy Dukhey and in exchange of Dukhey, Dokkhin Rai will give him wealth beyond imagination. Dhona agreed with the lucrative proposal and within seconds, creatures came from the forests to fill the ships with huge amount of honey and wax. Dukhey saw Dokkhin Rai in front of him and he prayed Bonbibian for saving him. She rescued him and her brother Shahjongoli fought with the demon and gave him punishment. Bonbibian returned that little boy to his home and gifted him a 'great treasure trove of honey and wax'. Thus Bonbibian showed the whole world about the law of jungle that

the rich and greedy would be punished while the poor and honest would be rewarded (Ghosh, 2004).

The story explains us that those who will be greedy for the wealth of the forests that is the natural resources will be punished. Only for necessity, one can use natural resources, not beyond that. This shows that the natural resources should be preserved. Through this, ecological balance would be maintained. In another portion of the story, it is said that the Bonbibis dividing the land into two halves- one for the wilderness, where Dokkhin Rai will rule and one half for the human habitation, where Bonbibi will rule. This point clearly indicates territorial distribution of the forest and the human habitation. Member of one territory will not encroach upon into another's realm. This territorial distribution will help to protect the forests from external attack. Though the story is a myth but this mythical story has put a restrain on the people's moral consciousness born out of fear and veneration towards Bonbibi. When the people enter into the forests, they are aware of the consequences if they violate the rules of the forests as said by Bonbibi.

#### **Effect of Govt. and Different Organizational Initiatives towards Forest Preservation in the Sundarbans**

We have said earlier that the India govt. has enacted prohibitory laws regarding forests. These have restrained people from destroying the natural resources of forests. Specifically for the Sundarbans, some conservation policies have been undertaken, from Sundarban Tiger Reserve (1973) to Man and Biosphere Programme (MAB) under UNESCO (2001). These policies have brought notice of the whole world towards the mangrove forest. As a result, not only inhabitants started taking care of the Sundarbans but also different Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have launched many conservational projects. Cumulatively all these initiatives have resulted positively but still a lot of work need to do.

#### **Collective Action for Plantation of Mangroves by People of the Sundarbans**

As we have discussed before that British introduced permanent human settlement in the Sundarbans by clearing the forests. People started their livelihood depending on the natural resources (like wood, honey, fish, crab and so on) of the Sundarbans. Gradually, they have realized that the forest is a treasure to them. They have nothing beyond this mangrove forest. They have recognized their mistakes of cutting mangrove trees. Traditionally, mythical stories have helped to raise awareness among the inhabitants for preservation of the forest. The prohibitory rules of Govt. and plantation efforts also have great roles in protection of the Sundarbans. All these have resulted into creation of consciousness towards preservation of this world heritage site.

In the empirical study for the present paper, it has been observed that present inhabitants of the Sundarbans are aware of the fact that they have to guard the forest or else they will be the worst victim. The data shows that collectively the villagers are planting saplings on the embankments, seashores by themselves. Eighty (80) percent of the respondents said that they plant saplings. This data reveals that majority portions of the respondents are aware about plantation and preservation of wilderness (Table 2). The inhabitants not only plant mangrove saplings collectively with villagers but also through a local club, Haripur Binodini Club and with forest department, local panchayats through Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). Thus it can be said that people of the Sundarbans are getting aware about plantation through collective action.

**Table 2**

Distribution of Respondents in terms of Response Regarding Plantation

Response Regarding Plantation	Number of Respondents (%)
Plant saplings	40 (80)
Do not plant	10 (20)
Total	50 (100)

Source: Field Work

## Conclusion

The local people of the Sundarbans have to depend on the natural resources of the mangrove forest for their livelihood. They adopt different occupations like honey collection, fishing, crab collection. These occupations are risky in nature. They have to struggle daily with environment for survival. The vulnerability binds them together. Through generations, they have built this 'we feeling'. Though the forest is the source of their fear and anxiety but the forest is also the source of solutions to their problems. The Sundarbans is their treasure trove. The mangrove forest is a companion to their struggle. This struggle is adequately portrayed in the indigenous mythical stories of the punthi literature. The Bonbibi story implicitly reveals about forest preservation and ecological balance. Govt. has taken some protective measures for the forest. Finally, the people of Sundarbans are aware of safeguarding this world heritage site. They have taken collective action for planting saplings sometime by themselves, sometime through helping local clubs and forest department in plantation. In conclusion, we can say that, the inhabitants' strong ethnic feelings as 'forest dweller' compel them to preserve the mangrove forest of the Sundarbans.

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