

A Comparison of Normative Values for Riverine and Non-Riverine Communities of the Indian Sundarbans: An Exploration into Sociological Aspect of the Residents of Matla River

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ABSTRACT : *River is a precious gift for human civilization. It offers variable interactions with society, some of which are devastating while many are blessings. Accepting all the positive and negative impacts of riverine actions man has settled along the river side, has developed their social relationship and eventually form society. With continuous interaction with the river, various types of rituals, customs, emotions, affections have been established and forms deep sense to the existing value system. Sundarbans is one of the most beautiful land of rivers. It is designed by numerable rivers, creeks and especially mangrove forest. Riverine action and mangrove ecosystem of this region frames supernaturalism and particular myth of pluralistic culture and bind people in the guidance of value system. However, with increasing distance from the river, the normative values are gradually faded out. With this postulation, present investigation aims to capture the relationship between riverine environment and strength of normative values in respect to two separate communities – riverine and non-riverine. The paper keeps in mind that the people living away from the river has feeble interaction with river and so likely their normative value is imperceptibly influenced by it.*

KEY WORDS: *Normative values, riverine community, vagaries of nature, perception, livelihoods.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The river of the Sundarbans (In India) is the precious gift for the people living in this region. People either staying close to it or away, carves their socio-cultural niche based on fishing and agricultural occupations in the lap of natural environment. On the other hand, life of people here is not at all smooth. The people have been living here, experience constant threat from the natural environment. Being close to the sea front, the region is characterized with occasional cyclones, embankment breaching and subsequent salt water inundation. Agricultural in the region is often threatened by devastating cyclones and salt water inundation. On the other side, fishing in deep river is quite risky and threatening due to chance of sudden attack of fierce animals and seasonal occurrence of cyclones at the Bay of Bengal. Such kind of guidance as well as fear form associational life in society and develop deep sense to common rituals and local deities of the region. In the Sundarbans, people living closed to river are dependent on the fishing occupation. They have plenty access to water resources and thus experience natural calamities frequently. On the other hand, the villages away from the river with agricultural livelihoods have rare experience of such natural calamities. Such differences due to position of locale, forms two separate communities – riverine community and non-riverine community.

From the perspective of river-oriented interactions two major differences have been noticed between riverine and non-riverine community. **First** one is the resource utilisation and **second** one is the impact of natural calamities. In terms of resource utilisation riverine community gets more positive feed back. The economic outlook for riverine community is essentially related to the work of fishing and fish-oriented trades and other related activities. They avail fishes, crabs, tiger prawn seeds etc. from the river and thus sustain their livelihoods. Contrarily, non-riverine community mainly depends on agricultural economy for their livelihoods. Dependency to river for agricultural practices is a historical phenomenon since the beginning of human settlement, though saline water of Matla river has no use for irrigation purposes. Thus, agriculture is restricted by mono-culture due to scarcity of irrigation facility. Irrigation by ground water is quite impossible as ground water is saline and fresh water available beneath 1400 feet (Kanjilal, 2000). Therefore, physical environment limits the growth of agriculture for the non-riverine community. Regarding, the impact of natural calamities, the riverine community is affected severely and frequently. They use to face cyclones, embankment breaching and occasional inundations. However, impact of natural hazard on the non-riverine community is feeble. Thus, riverine community is the most sensitive in terms of positive and negative stimuli of the environment, whereas non-riverine community is quite silent and indifferent. Such differences of environmental perception may results

different perception between these two communities about the rituals and customs of the region. The present investigation has been designed along the left bank of Matla river in the Sundarbans. It aims to capture the difference of perception about the value system of these two communities.

Rationale to the Problem

Ecological values contribute positively to human experiences. It constitutes human consciousness, human behaviour, and everything relating to norms and regulations of an indigenous society. The indigenous culture promotes environmentally sustainable lifeways, signifies a closer association between nature and value system (Steward, 1977). The rhythms of nature and its mystery outline the belief, values and form devotion to the existing value system (Taylor, 2001). In a natural ecosystem human requires natural givens, but they do not take the environment ready to hand. Rather they modify, rebuilding nature to their cultural needs, and develop their livelihoods based on natural resources (Schwartz, 1999). Such dependency on the nature binds human being in their occupational niche and forms particular myth, norms and disciplines in their livelihoods (Inglehart & Baker, 2000).

The Sundarbans is pronounced with some typical rituals, customs and norms which are the outcomes of environmental ethics and supernaturalism (Roychoudhuri, 1980). The life of the fishermen is always in danger. It is threatened by natural calamities as well as fear of biotic hazards. Living along the river side prompts frequent threats from nature and always leads fear-psychosis in their mind. It promotes them to have a strong belief in the value system of fishing activity as well as in their habitual life (Sarkar, 2009). On the other hand, the non-riverine people have very few experiences and thereby they have feeble connection with the value system. However, they worship all local deities and perform every ritual, tradition but, their feelings, devotions are feebly intermingled with the endemic culture of the Sundarbans. The paper examines the difference of perception of the residents of riverine as well as non-riverine communities to establish the relationship between riverine environment and normative values.

Area under Study

The data for this study has been collected from the eight villages along the left bank of Matla river of the Sundarbans. Four villages have been taken along the riverside of Matla and rest four away from the same river (Fig. 1). The riverine villages taken into account are – Bhangankhali, Purandar, Ananda abad-4 and Jhorkhali-4.

The deterioration of riverine environment is least in the southern villages and at the same time fishing opportunity is relatively higher due to vastness of river, whereas riverine condition is most deteriorating in the northern villages and logically fishing is limited due to narrowing of river caused by rapid siltation. Considering all these arguments, the riverine villages have been selected considering the entire north-south stretch of Matla river, keeping substantial physical distance from each other. Such a selection facilitates to avail verities of samples and at the same time helps to avoid repetition problem of similar responses. Selection of non-riverine villages has been done similarly from north to south covering the whole study area. The non-riverine villages that have been considered are Phulmalancha, Sonakhali-2, Ranigarh and Jhorkhali-2.

Materials and Methods

Two different attempts have been made here to perceive the response of people about normative values and their faith, and belief. The first one is quantitative, in which rating of perception has been done. The second attempt is purely qualitative. In this attempt authors made some field observation regarding voyages of fishing, annual worship of local deities and others festivals.

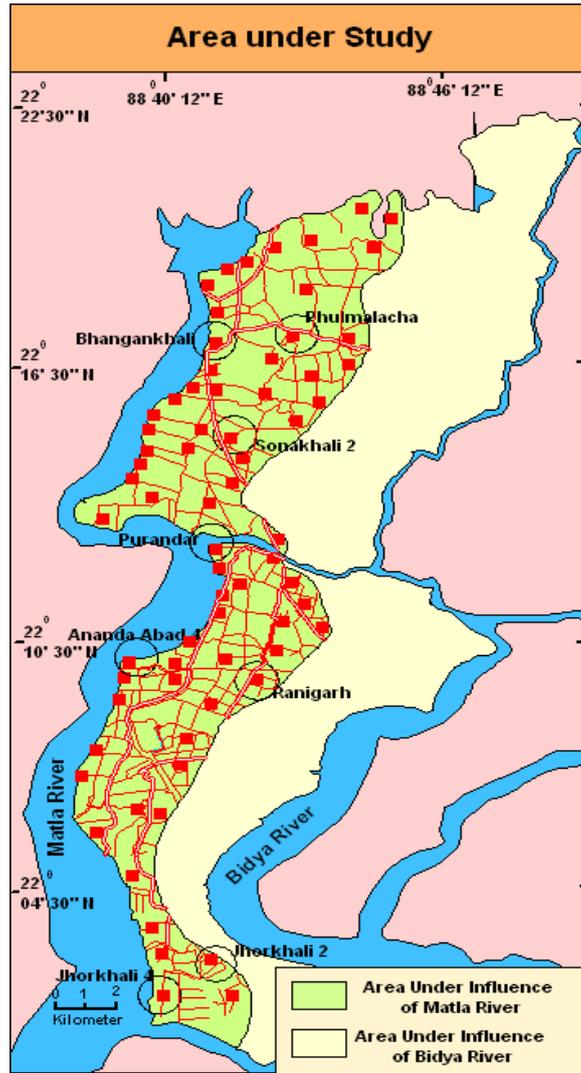


Fig. 1

Samples

Samples for quantitative analysis were taken from the eight aforesaid villages based on different age groups like – 20 to 35, 36 to 50 and more than 50. Sample size varies from one village to another and it ranges from 45 to 60 (Table 1). The collected samples from each villages are equally divided in all age groups. The judgement of respondent selection has been done on the basis of age, good responses and experience for long time (at least 15 years). The strength of consensual bond develops through repeated interactions with a particular neighbourhood (Milligan, 1998). Thus, only residents with long experience (at least 15 years living experience) were taken into consideration.

Table 1: Village-wise Number of Respondents

Type	Village	Sample Size	Type	Village	Sample Size
Riverine	Bhangankhali	60	Non-Riverine	Phulmalancha	60
	Purandar	60		Sonakhali-2	46
	Ananda Abad-4	45		Ranigarh	50
	Jhorkhali- 4	60		Jhorkhali-2	60

Perception Study about Normative values

The role of value system is intermingled in the life of people of the Sundarbans. The rituals relating to annual worship of *Bonobibi*, *Dakshinrai*, *Ganga* are most popular aspects of the immaterial culture of this region (Ghoshal, 2006) though all the traits are not equally found to be performed by the riverine and the non-riverine communities.

The worships to boat and deities like - *Bonobibi, Dakshinrai* at the voyage of fishing are considered very special occasions for the riverine community (Bera et al, 2010), especially for the fishermen and these are performed frequently with full devotion and dedication. On the other side, some specific festivals like Nabanna, *Pous Sankranti* are very significant in the socio-cultural life of the people residing away from river (Pramanik, 2008)). These are performed on annual basis with full devotion and execution. Considering these two, an attempt has been made to study the strength of value system among the people of riverine and non-riverine communities. Two specific items are taken into judgment – devotion to worship of the deities (X) and justification of the rituals in the real life (Y). The items are perceived in eleven point scale ranging from 0 to10. Zero (0) represents no devotion and no justification, whereas ten (10) signifies vice versa. The eight villages are investigated and thereafter average perceived values (Table 2) have been employed in figure 2.

II. ANALYSIS

Rating of Perception: Quantitative Dissection

Taking a view at the figure 2, it is obvious that the riverine community shows more reverence to their deities in comparison to the non-riverine one. They have strong belief and faith to the existing norms relating to their occupational life, which is relatively weak for the non-riverine community. This difference of perception can be grounded from the field investigation (Table 1). For riverine community, annual worship of deities like – *Bonobibi, Ganga, Dakshinrai* are performed with full devotion mainly in fishing-caste villages, wherein people from non-caste gather to enjoy it. Non-caste riverine villages have deep belief to the existing norms and thereby they feel urge to join in such occasions. This practice leads to inter-village interaction between caste and non-caste and eventually builds a strong bond. The scanario is to some extent different from the non-riverine community. They have deep feelings to the same deities but they perform worship in a popular way. During the time of festivals, arrangement is made with different cultural programmes leading to gathering of people from the sourrounding villages. This interaction is nothing but a popular recreation. On the other hand, the festivals for the non-riverine community are performed with dedication but it is only within the village. Sometimes people from the nearest village join and participate, but this happen only in few occasions. The inter-village level interation relating to this is seeminlgy low in comparison to riverine one.

Table 2: Worship Execution and Faith

Riverine				Non-Riverine			
Village	Sample	X	Y	Village	Sample	X	Y
Bhangankhali	60	7.97	7.68	Phulmalancha	60	7.55	5.68
Purandar	60	8.17	7.62	Sonakhali-2	36	7.36	4.78
Ananda Abad-4	45	7.91	7.69	Ranigarh	45	7.22	5.27
Jhorkhali-4	60	8.42	7.73	Jhorkhali-2	60	7.68	5.78

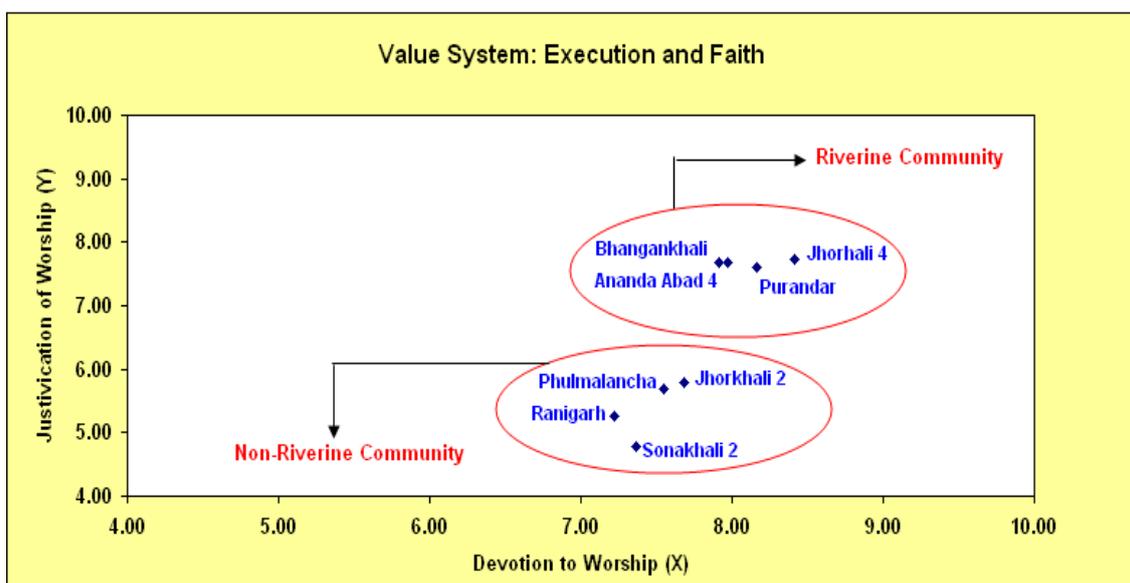


Fig. 2

Scenario of Rituals and Festivals: Qualitative Dimension

Along the river Matla, the life of the fisherfolk is always in danger and catches are often uncertain. It promotes them to have a strong belief in the value system of fishing activity. It starts on the day of laying the keel of the boat. The worship of boats is performed by the caste priest of the owner offering fruits and flowers. Worshipping of gears occur at the time of making of boats. Some rituals are also found during the making of net (Roychoudhury, 1980). After completion of net making, it is greeted with earthen lamps, earthen pots, vermilion, turmeric, iron nail etc. Different kinds of rituals relating to worship are performed after the preparation of boats and nets. The date of voyage is selected on the basis of tidal condition. Their journey is followed by a series of rituals. Prior to the departure, different deities are worshipped. For the good fortune in their journey they worship *Staya Narayan* and to avoid evil spirit they worship god *Sani* (deity of evil) on Saturday preceding the date of their departure. Among all deities *Devi Ganga* is mostly worshipped. It is believed that life of the fisherfolk and their success depends on her grace. Thus, on the day before to the departure from natal village, they perform worship to *Devi Ganga* with some flowers and fruits. Worship of *Devi Ganga* is not always performed by caste priest, rather in maximum cases it is done by the boatman or by the most experienced crewman in the team. This grounds social right of fisherfolk in worship related rituals in spite of their backward position in the society. Before journey all sorts of ceremonial right are performed by fisherfolk. They prepare an earthen pot filled with water in the name of deity *Ganga*. The pot is covered with red napkin and a coconut is placed over it.

On the day of journey, the married women worship it on the river side. Afterwards two ends of the boat are smeared with mustard oil, turmeric and vermilion and finally the journey starts. Installed earthen pot is carried throughout the journey and placed it at the front of the boat. In the beginning of the journey they sprinkle some water on the boat in the name of *Ganga* to avert ill fate. On the day of their journey they set their boat in to the deep river water and in maximum cases they anchor their boat near the forest areas. They have to enter in the forest to collect the woods for cooking purposes. Before that they worship *Bonobibi*, the deity of forest and *Dakshinrai*, the male deity of tiger. In the deep forest area tigers are frequently met. Many fisherfolks are killed by tigers' attack. Apart from this, attack of crocodiles, snake bites are important biotic hazards. The environment here is very scary and these deities are only saviour in the forest area – they belief. The first catch of the season is very sacred for fisherfolks. After arriving at the land, the catches are greeted with turmeric and vermilion. River water is sprinkled over the fishes and some amount of money of the first sale is kept for the performance of *Ganga* worship at the end of the fishing season. Fishing operations starting from boat and net construction to the end of fishing season are designed with performance of rituals and devotion to belief. Thus, normative values are intermingled with the culture of the fisherfolks and this is gleaned out from the field observation. Riverine community along the river Matla shows a deep sensation to all the value system of the Sundarbans. Non-riverine community, especially agricultural people perform many ceremonial rites in different stages of agricultural operation. Value system of them is also designed with some series of rituals, though the devotion as well as belief is not so much deep rooted in comparison to the rituals performed in the riverine villages. Needless to say that here agriculture pattern is mostly mono crop. People are forced to depend on the other source of income other than agriculture. Though, land is treated as an important property, but productivity is not so much lucrative. Very few cultural festivals and rituals have been intermingled with agricultural economy. The famous harvest festivals like *Nabannaya* and *Pous Sankranti* are intertwined with the first harvest of rice grain of the community feast named *Rannapuja* which is common festival in other parts of West Bengal of India. Different kinds of ritual design the festivals of *Nabannaya* and *Pous Sankranti*. Songs, dance, drama (*jatra*) are performed on the occasion of *Nabannaya*, but these entire cultural programmes are related with folk tales of *Bonobibi* and *Ganga* deity. *Pous Sankranti* is popular in the non-riverine community due to influence of riverine culture as it is the day of annual worship of *Ganga* deity. This phenomenon significantly prompts the domination of riverine folk culture over the culture of agricultural society. This clearly reveals that unlike agriculturalists the fisherfolks are more devoted to their value system of the Sundarbans. The reason behind this is very clear. The fisherfolks lead their livelihoods from the vast unfavourable natural conditions where life is always at stake and the catches are largely beyond their control. Insecurity of life due to freaks and vagaries of nature forces them to have reverence to the value system of the region.

In the cultural tradition of the Sundarbans, rivers and forests occupy the central position in regulating the value system. Myths of *Bonobibi* and *Dakshinrai* have profound impact in this region. Worship of folk deities like – *Ganga*, *Bonobibi*, *Dakshinrai*, *Manasa* are the most popular festivals of this region. All these deities are worshiped annually and for those occasions different kinds of rituals occur at different places at fixed point of time. People use to gather for those festivals associated with different cultural programmes. These arrangements are most popular within the non-riverine communities and it leads inter-village interaction.

They enjoy the festivals as like they do in other popular festivals of Hindu and Muslim religion, though their own programmes like - *Nabannaya* and *Pous Sankranti* are confined within one or two villages. The scenario is completely different for riverine community. However, riverine communities perform their annual festival along the river side and the budget of the programme is very low. The deities are not always worshipped by caste priest; rather it is performed by experienced fisherfolk of the villages. The villagers lead an austere life while enjoying the occasions. Field investigation reveals that annual worship of the deities brings the whole community into a single tie and leads inter-village interaction for continuously two to three days. It is necessary to mention that over the last ten to fifteen years constant diffusion of urban dance, popular songs have transformed the folk art to a great extent, especially within the non-riverine communities. This kind of change is evident along the river Matla; however still people fill deep sensation to their worshiped deities.

III. CONCLUSION

The investigation clearly confirms the posited influence of riverine environment on the strength of normative values. Undoubtedly, life of riverine community is associated with risk and hostility. Several adversities appear in their daily life because 'fishing for living is a vigorous, thrusting and economically risky occupation which has few virtues and the single crowing disadvantage that is hazardous in extreme' (Bera et al., 2010). From one generation to next, this tradition persists regardless of several evils in their family life. Such kind of affinity with occupation as well as with riverine environment develops deep sense of values to the existing norms, rituals of the region. On the contrary, the life and livelihoods of non-riverine community are quite unresponsive from the adversities of riverine environment. They are feebly connected with culture of river and so likely their strength normative values are quite weak. The insignificant stimulus neither highly positive nor highly negative alienates them from the so called environmental culture of this region.

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