



A Profile of Christian Communities in Sundarbans

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Abstract:

The human culture in the Sundarbans region of Lower Bengal continues to fluctuate, mixing and acculturate with the arrival and departure of various communities. In this land dominated by lower caste Hindus, the trend of mixed culture has developed with the arrival of muslim, christian and tribal people. With the arrival of the Portuguese and British, many people of Lower Bengal became Christians. Apart from highlighting the socio-cultural characteristics of this Christian community, various aspects of acculturation of these regional cultures have been explored.

Basically it was not possible for the people of this region to completely assimilate the foreign Christian culture. Because of the culture obtained by conversion was not fully able to influence the place of their previous traditional culture. Even though the Christian people of this region tried to adopt foreign customs and traditions, there naturally existed in them various characteristics of local culture.

The expression of these regional characteristics is particularly prevalent with little variation in food, speech, dress and manners. The local character of the Bengali language is reflected in the conversation. Social customs, worship of regional deities, etc. continue to flow with the amalgamation of cultural traits.

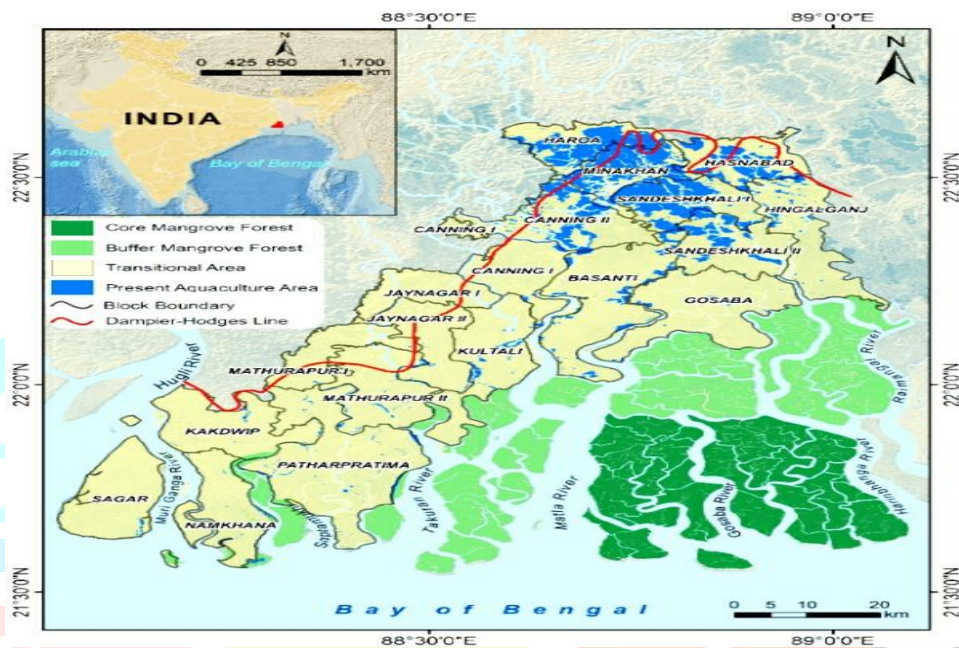
Keyword : Fluctuate, acculturation, explore, diversity, adaptation, colonize.

Objective of the study:

Here my main objective is to highlight the society, religion and culture of the Christian people living in the contemporary period in a new way. Analyzing the people's life and culture of the Sundarbans region emerging from various source and presenting the outline of the evolution, changing and mixing that have taken place in the socio-economic pattern, religious affairs, daily life and culture of the Christian communities in difficult environment.

Introduction :

Flowing through the arrival and return of various human races, the Lower Bengal's Sundarban regional human culture has received diversity. Into this diversity came foreign cultures and ideologies. The influx of Muslims, Christians and tribal communities not only ushered in changes in these regional religious and cultural ideologies, but the adaptation and expansion of the newest culture varied the traditional way of life in Coastal Bengal. The brutality of the rulers along with their flourishing of swords, social strictness and discrimination set the scene for the conversion of the local lower caste masses. The inevitable consequence of which was the emergence of mixed culture. As the presence of multiple people in this geographical environment became a matter of course, so also the natural correspondence between them prevailed.



Indian Sundarbans

Literature Review:

Here the overall lifestyle, cultural diversity and mixed flow of marginal life of people belonging to the Christian community

of Sundarbans are highlighted. The lifestyle of this marginal man has been mentioned by various authors in their writings. However, none of them shed light on the life and culture of the people at the grass root level. I have tried to illuminate distinctively from a purely fundamental point of view. It is completely different .

Among those who have previously worked on the Sundarban region and coastal Bengal are W.W.Hunter: A Statistical Account of Bengal, vol-I, A.K. Mondal & R.K.Ghosh: Sundarban: A Socio-Bio Ecological Study, J.J.A. Campos: History of the Portuguese in Bengal, Haraprasad Chattopadhyaya: The mystery of the Sundarbans and Aparna Mandal: An Ecological history of Sundarbans etc.

Methodology:

Some articles, various theses, reports, newspapers and letters have been used here as supporting documents. Several archives and regional libraries have been visited. Moreover, help

has been taken from some learned teachers, experts, renowned scholars to collect some relevant information. Other relevant

Primary and secondary sources are also used here for information on selected topics.

Analyses:

The arrival of the Portuguese and the British in the 16th century and later saw various insertions into Lower Bengal public life. From this time, many higher and lower caste Hindus and tribals were converted by the Christian clergy to seek early privileges. The early efforts to spread Christianity began with the conversion of the lower classes in particular. Gradually they become accustomed to the Christian cultural lifestyle. As Mughal rule in Bengal weakened in the late 16th century, the arrival of the Portuguese and Muggs wreaked havoc on the vast coastal region of Lower Bengal. A similar description is given in Camposes' History of the Portuguese in Bengal. It is said there, "In a labyrinth of rivers the adventurers could dive and dart, appear and disappear, ravage the country and escape with impunity. Hence Bengal has been the victim of exploits and depredations of foreign and native adventurers alike."(1)

These Portuguese are sometimes known as 'Hermads', 'Bombetes' and 'Firinghees' to the Indian people. The Portuguese fleet was named 'Armada', a malformation of which is 'Hermad'. And from this the Portuguese were called Hermads by the people of this country.(2) It should be noted that the Portuguese married the women from this country after they were converted to Christianity. The mixed caste that resulted from the fusion of the women here with the Portuguese came to be known as Firinghee. It is mentioned in Campose History of the Portuguese in Bengal that, "Frank is the parent word of Feringhi by which name the Indian-born Portuguese are still known. The Arabs and Persians called the French Crusaders Frank, Ferang a corruption of France. When the Portuguese and other Europeans came to India, the Arabs applied to them the same name Ferang, and then Feringhi."(3) Chittagong, Khulna, Noakhali, Hatia, Sandwip, Gunsakhali, Firingibazar, Cox Bazar, Haringhata Estuary of the Sundarban region and many Firingis are living on the coast of Twenty Four Parganas.(4)

Ralph Fitch came to Bengal in 1588. At that time it was perceptible that the Portuguese had complete dominance in Hooghly.(5) They colonized successively Chittagong, Dianga and Ramu. And during the Barabhuiya rule they were able to establish special authority in Lower Bengal. The Firinghee-Portuguese created a reign of terror in this Lower Bengal region in association with the Muggs. Portuguese pirates are known as Hermad. They infringed the coastal areas and forced the common people to convert to Christianity. They boasted that the Hermads had converted more people to Christianity in one year than the missionaries had tried in ten years.(6)

The inhuman activities of the Mugg-Firinghee had a special impact on the social order of Sundarbans in Lower Bengal at that time. Women caught in their banditry witnessed brutal torture and even a woman caught or touched was ostracized or outcasted. In this way, they were forever vilified and slandered. A distinct society was created due to the misalignment of the Mugg-Firinghee. So that appears to be a large number of Mugg-Firinghee and mixed caste born from them living in different parts of the sea coast of South Bengal.(7)

On the other side, the British established political power in Bengal by winning the Battle of Plassey in 1757. The East India Company began to settle their might in the Sundarban areas of Lower Bengal in order to supply the demand for foodstuffs in England and increase revenue. Its context begins with a gift given to the company by Nawab Mir Zafar of Bengal. The annexed territory consisted of twenty-four parganas, which included extensive areas of the Sundarban region along with the Bay of Bengal coast.

Once upon a time, this forest on the outskirts of Calcutta was considered by the British to be a hostile and unhealthy region, home to ferocious tigers and wild animals, pirates and forest

robbers.(8) Ignoring this environment, in 1770, Collector General Claude Russell adopted the first forest harvesting plan. Subsequently, in 1785, with the permission of Warren Hastings, then the Collector of this region, Henkel Sahib, took measures to lease land in the area of Jungle Mahal, and the expansion of agriculture and settlement increased.(9)

Along with this came the expansion of arable areas and the spread of Christianity among the lower caste people in this vast area. Many upper and lower caste Hindus and tribal people from neighbouring areas converted to Christianity due to social inequality, humiliation, deception, deprivation and hope of early privileges. Although the role of Christian priests was important during this period. Thus gradually they became accustomed to Christian cultural life. At the same time, a different socio-cultural trend began to flow in the Sundarbans of Lower Bengal region.

There are Christians (converts) living in Sagar, Namkhana, Kakdwip, Patharpratima, Kultali, Canning, Basanti, Gosaba, Hasnabad, Hingaljanj etc. in the Sundarban region of West Bengal. They are mainly agriculturists, but many of them make a living by fishing in rivers, hunting shrimps, crabs, and collecting forest wood, wax, and honey. In this geographical environment, such people are engaged in alternative occupations like aquatic and forest life. In the discussion of various aspects of the lifestyles observed and practiced in the socio-culture of the Christian community of here, the custom that comes inevitably is the purification ceremony. Moreover, on thirty days after the birth of the child, the priest prays in the name of Jesus and wishes the newborn well. When six months are completed to give food intake, a coming-of-age ceremony at the age of eighteen, Banaprakasha is performed by the priest before the marriage. And records of marriages are preserved in the Church. Birthday celebrations are given special importance in Christian families of this region, as in other Christian societies. Here birthday of every member is celebrated on 25th December every year to commemorate the birthday of Jesus Christ. People from other communities happily participate in this ritual because of the coexistence of different communities in the region. February is the Festival of Lights for Protestant Christians. In this month the Holy Spirit of Jesus appears in the form of a parrot. It is known as the Blessed Wednesday. On 8th February the people belonging to the christian communities visit the houses of the same religion with lightning candles and five lamps and began to pray and chant the name of God throughout the night near the church. The festival of lights is initiated by the priest or father.

Basically it was not possible for the people of this region to completely assimilate the foreign Christian culture. Because the culture obtained by conversion was not able to fully influence the place of their previous traditional culture. Even though the Christian people of this region tried to adopt foreign customs and traditions. Along with the various characteristics of local cultural notions. So the majority of people are new to the location and coexistence within the culture. The intention to fully adaptation to the culture is not only slow, but also a opaque. The public life in the Sundarban region of lower Bengal is no exception.

The expression of these regional characteristics is particularly prevalent with little variation in food, speech, dress and manners. The local character of the Bengali language is reflected in the conversation. The Christian lifestyle flows through the use of Dhoti, Punjabi, Saree, Shaya, Blouse, Pajama, Churidar, etc., which are common in the region, apart from clergymen, fathers and sisters who are directly related to the Church and all ordinary Christian citizens. Even after conversion, the men and women of the tribal families are still somewhat able to maintain the dress code of their own community.

While the practice of taking dowry in marriage is prevalent among other communities in the region, the Christian community has completely abandoned it. However, in the case of their marriage, the reflection of the traditional customs of this region can be observed, such as - giving garlands, wearing conch shells, donating vermilion etc. Vermilion is donated in one rupee coin. Protestants, Catholics, Baptists wear vermilion and ornaments, but the people of the Sapbad Christian community avoid them completely. In banquets or any social arrangements, people from

other communities are invited and they accept it with mutual respect. After the burial of the deceased, the return home is accompanied by kirtana, which is an imitation of the local Hindu custom. After the death, prayers are offered at home with candles and incense for three days. Local Hindus, Muslims, tribal people also attended this prayer meeting. In addition to the prayer for the repose of the soul of the deceased is prayed by the priest or father according to the biblical interpretation.

The people in the Sundarbans of Lower Bengal continue to live in precarious conditions. A large number of them depend mainly on rivers and forests for their livelihood. Ignoring the crocodiles in the water and the tigers in the den, these aquatic and forest dwellers manage their livelihood by collecting fish, fingerlings of shrimp, crabs, wood, wax and honey. They worship and remember various deities like Banabibi, Dakshinaraya, Kaluraya, Ghazi, Gangadevi, Narayani etc. while going to river or forest. During this time the people of the Christian community worship Jesus and carry the sign of the Holy Cross. Moreover, they participate in the worship of Hindu gods and goddesses but take complacency by remembering their own God. Although, they refrain from observing any stick out or penances common in other communities. On the other side, Hindu and tribal community people offer in church their prayers to Jesus thanking him for his sacrifice for mankind. There they offer auspicious prayers with incense, candles and molasses. However, even though they live side by side, the people of the Muslim community do not observe this custom. However, like other communities, some Muslims have converted to Christianity.

The arrival of the Christian community had several effects on the socio-culture of this coastal region. Especially as many people of this region have directly entered the foreign culture by adopting Christianity, so different aspects of foreign culture have naturally entered the non-Christian local population, which currently flows different streams. Special influence of it can be seen on the speech, sports, language etc. of this region. English civilians and servants used to disembark at the border villages along with the coast for keeping themselves fit after long voyages. Their sporting language became increasingly popular in the region. A game called 'guard on' is popularly pronounced as gadan. 'Durable' is pronounced as dibbul and 'shot full' becomes chhattul with projected pronunciation.

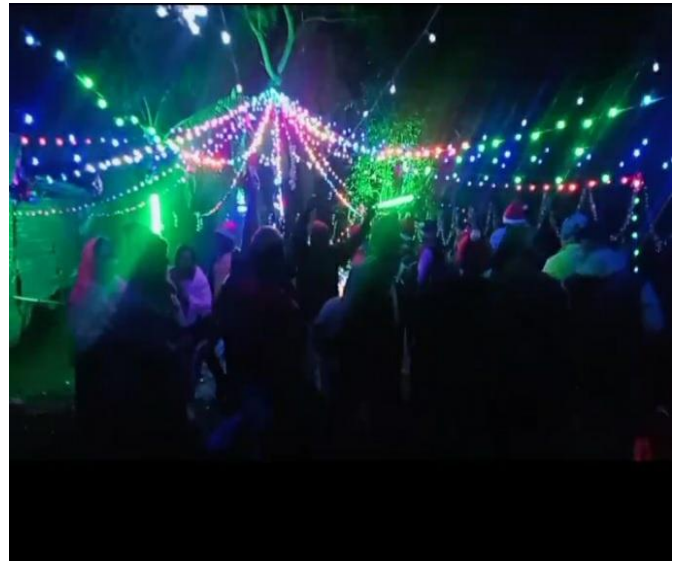
The old men and women of this coastal region still speak many English words unconsciously. If you understand the meaning of the word chhayamkor, you can understand that it comes from same, the word 'Thudi' comes from sorry. The English word 'tour' is pronounced here taure. Moreover the words lot, grantee, manager, lotsaheb, lotdar, suited-booted, fast to me (fostumi), whole state (holistit) etc. have been replaced by local pronunciation. Again, English names are associated with various places in Sundarbans, such as - Morelganj, Meriganj, Davis Abad, Hingalganj, Canning, Fraserganj, Halliday, Lothiandwip etc. Thus the influence of foreign culture is observed here.

The presence of multiple castes and religious communities in the Lower Bengal region and their harmonious coexistence has given this regional culture one of its distinctive features. Benevolence towards other cultures prevails along with carrying the cultural traditions of one own community. Hence the fusion of local culture is especially prevalent in this region. Daily prayers are organized according to the custom of the church. In the sacred hymns or religious hymns that are recited there, the addition of Bengali idioms and melodies is observed. Moreover, in the case of musical instruments, the local tunes of the Hindu community have been combined with the use of native khol, tabor and cymbal. Harinama Sangkirtana, one of these regional cultures, is performed in Hindu families to wish for good luck and heavenly well-being. Similarly, for the benefit of the Christian family, the Reverends perform the Christ Namakirtan at the memorial service (pic-1).

However, every year on December 24th after twelve midnight, people of the Christian community enter every house chanting the name of Jesus and in the morning they directly attend the synagogue or church (pic.2). Religious music performed by Christians follows this regional style.



Pic.1: Christian kirtana by Reverend Shyamal Pramanik



Pic.2: Jesus Namakirtana by Christian Communities

Conclusion:

If we look at the Christian society, it is clear that many people of this region live in the Christian community, but they unable completely get out from the previous socio-cultural characteristics. Some aspects of the primitive culture of their ancestors inevitably remain. Thus, it appears that the former trend is still flowing in the local Christian society. A mixed culture is flowing through the coexistence of local culture and foreign Christian culture, which has given this regional culture its uniqueness.

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