



A Distinct Social History Focusing On Birth- Death-Marriage In The Folk Life Of The Indian Sundarbans (1947 – 2000)

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Abstract

Due to geographical reasons, the village community of Sundarbans has long maintained its own rural character as it is almost cut off from the contact of urban civilization and culture. Sociologically, the village society of Sundarbans has actually become a self-centred village society. Thus, a self-centred village community is actually the home of folk culture. The virginity of the subject related to culture is preserved as long as each community is cut off from the dazzling spectacle of urban culture or retains its rural character. Binay Ghosh's book - *Banglar Loksanskritir Samajtattwa* says, "Until the social and geographical separation of people in the age of mechanized transport, the natural form of culture was almost untainted everywhere, even in the self-centred village society of our country." Folk culture may be narrow in scope, but its vitality can never be underestimated. The reason is that the folk culture emerges from the direct human relationship, spiritual connection and deep sincerity of all members of each community group.

A few events of the social life, such as family formation through marriage, birth, and death – even considering just these three events, a distinct social history emerges from village life in the Indian Sundarbans. Be it the minimum age of marriage, the idea of birth control, and the method of childbirth or cremation of a person, a different history of backwardness emerges in the marginal public life of the Indian Sundarbans. In the present article, the unique social history centred on birth-death-marriage in the marginal public life of the post-independence Indian Sundarbans is reviewed from a sociological perspective.

Keynote: Folk-culture virginity, family formation through marriage, birth and customs, cremation, reincarnation-centred belief and customs.

Due to geographical reasons, the village community of Sundarbans has long maintained its own rural character as it is almost cut off from the contact of urban civilization and culture. Sociologically, the village society of Sundarbans has actually become a self-centred village society. This self-centred village community is actually the home of folk culture. The virginity of the cultural subject is preserved as long as each community is cut off from the dazzling spectacle of urban culture or retains its rural character. Binay Ghosh's book - *Sociology of Folk Culture of Bengal* says, "Until the social and geographical separation of people in the era of mechanized transport, the nature of culture was almost untainted everywhere, even in the self-centred village society of our country."¹ The range of folk culture is narrow, but its vitality can never be

underestimated. It is because, folk culture emerges from the direct human relationship, spiritual connection and deep sincerity of all members of each community group. Speaking about the formation of folk culture, Ghosh referred to the views of anthropologist Alfred Lewis Kroeber. Anthropologist Kroeber said - "The relatively small range of their cultural content, the close-knitness of the participation in it, the very limitation of scope, all make for a sharpness of patterns in the culture, which are well characterized, consistent, and inter-related. Narrowness, depth, and intensity are the qualities of folk-cultures."²

A few social life events, such as family formation through marriage, birth, and death – even considering just these three events, a distinct social history emerges from village life in the Indian Sundarbans. Whether it is the minimum age of marriage or the idea of birth control, and whether it is the method of childbirth or the cremation of a person's dead body, a distinct history of backwardness emerges in the marginal public life of Sundarbans in the social history of twentieth-century India. The research on folk culture in the village society of Sundarbans reveals many images of family life there. At the beginning of the discussion of this article, the issue raised from the village society about marriage i.e. family formation is specially mentioned here.

Due to lack of proper education and financial backwardness, there are many errors in the village society of Sundarbans in the 20th century regarding the marriage of bride and groom at the right age. It is not rare in the society that many boys and girls get married within the age of sixteen or seventeen. If you go to the remote villages of the Indian Sundarbans, you can find some opinions in this regard. According to many elders in the local society - '*meyera kooritei boori*' (girls are old in their twenties). Therefore, according to them, girls should be married in their twenties.³ In the folk society of Sundarbans, there has been no significant change in the marriageable age of bride and groom even at the beginning of the 21st century. Evidence is found in the remote villages of Hingalganj, Sandeshkhali, Gosaba etc. thana (P.S.) areas of such incidents. Because, according to the government, there are many examples of couples who get married before reaching the age of maturity (minimum 18 years for girls and 21 for boys).⁴ Since no marriage registration is done for such underage couples under government-recognised marriage registration offices, it is not possible to provide accurate official data and statistics about such marriage of underage couples.

Ignorance of these underage couples about health is a serious problem. Underage couples are uneducated about health; on the other hand, many of them are uneducated about birth control. In some cases, they are also superstitious or irrational. Some consider birth control to be anti-religious or even a sin. However, as a result of government propaganda, many people have recently (in the 21st century) become interested in birth control. S. L. Dey and A. K. Bhattacharya, in their 'The Refugee Settlement in the Sundarbans, West Bengal: A Socio-Economic Study, 1971-72' show that girls in the Sundarbans marry between the average age of ten and fourteen and boys between the average age of twenty and twenty-four, and further states that only 6.9 % of girls are married on or after the age of nineteen and 13 % of boys on or after the age of twenty-nine.⁵

It should be noted that, even today, many local issues and characteristics can be observed in the customs of the people of Sundarbans around the birth or death of people, the ceremony of putting rice to a child's mouth for the first time, marriage etc. and various religious and entertainment events. A lot of new information emerges on all those subjects in the field survey. The method of childbirth is one such issue.

In the 20th century, the communication between the city and the Sundarbans was not very good. So most children had to be born in the old-fashioned way, at home in the 20th century Sundarbans. The people of Sundarbans were forced to depend on the midwives and barbers of the neighbourhood, even knowing that the life of the pregnant woman was in danger. A *Dai* or *Dai mother* (midwife) was a class of older women who assisted in childbirth in the Sundarbans region. They were also known as '*Dhatri-maa*' (midwives). They would try to solve many problems during the childbirth crisis and after the birth of the child. She would also

try to manage the responsibility of primary care of new-born baby and the mother. Due to the services of midwives – starting from cutting the baby's umbilical cord to primary care of mother and her new-born baby, many people called them '*Thyakani Buri*' (Rescuer Old-Lady) in the local language. They had no such training in midwifery. Yet through experience and divine-reliance and sincere efforts, they become true life-givers to mothers and new-borns in the harsh socio-economic and geo-physical environment of the remote rural areas of the Sundarbans. Many children therefore also addressed them as '*Baroma*' (elder mother).⁶ However, in the Sundarbans, those who are financially well-off now take the assistance of a doctor (If they do not avail of the facility of primary health centre, in most cases at home, the doctor is a Quack Doctor) during childbirth in their families.

Folk customs around a new-born is another important regional aspect of folk society in the Sundarbans. There are many customs and traditions around the new-born child in Bengal as well as in India. Sundarbans is no exception, but some of the customs and traditions celebrated here have their own regional characteristics. In the case of home-birth in the Sundarbans during the period under discussion, the room where the baby was born was called an '*aantur ghar.*' In normal delivery, almost in every case, the condition of pregnant women becomes critical. In such a situation, the people of Sundarbans used to remember and pray to Mother Shashthidevi to wish for the well-being of the pregnant woman and the soon-to-be-born child. After the child's birth, therefore, on certain days, the people of Sundarbans used to observe certain folk customs according to their own beliefs and rituals, which continue even today. For example, after the birth of a child, there is a custom of observing '*Chha-raat*' (sixth night). In this case, the folk belief is that on this night in the child's bedroom (*aantur ghar*), Bhagyadevi, or Dharmaraja himself, comes and decides what will happen to the child's *bhagya* (future) or decides the 'forehead-writings' of the new-born baby. It is called '*Chha-raater likhan*' (writings of the sixth night), which no one can refute.

Based on the information found in the field research, it can be said that on the occasion of '*Chha-raat,*' it was customary to keep a small wooden plow and a yoke for the new-born in the '*aantur ghar.*' Later, however, in many homes it was accepted as a custom to keep an ink bottle, a khag pen and a palm leaves as writing materials near the child's head instead of these symbolic farming tools on the occasion of '*chha-raat*' in the '*aantur ghar.*' Amidst this change in tradition, parents of Sundarbans reflected the idea that their newborn should not only become a 'farmer's child turned farmer,' but also an educated person. In recent times, accepting the timely change of the writing materials too, many families put '*Varna Parichay,*' '*Dharapat,*' '*Pratham Bhag,*' '*Dwitiya Bhag,*' a new Slate and chalk pencil or a new notebook and pen near the child's head on the sixth night. Then, on the twenty-first day of the child's birth, wishing for the child's well-being, an idol of Shashthidevi (Goddess or guardian of new-born child) is installed or a '*Mangala Ghata*' (a pot filled with water on festive occasion) is placed in the name of Shashthidevi and worshipped. Through this ritual, the new-born and his mother are freed from *aantur-dasha* or impurity. Now they can go everywhere in the house and touch everything. About the purpose or importance of worshipping Shashthidevi in the *Brahmavaivarta Purana* in the sixth stanza, it is stated that -

*"Bhumishtho hoile shishu sutika aagare,
Shashtho Deene Shashthipuja Karibe Saadore.
Ekabinso Deen Pore Karibe Pujon,
Tahole Karen Shashthi Mangol Sadhon."*⁷

On the day of Shashthi Puja, the newborn and the mother have to wear new clothes. Paddy, durba, various fruits, sweets and rice, bananas are arranged as puja offerings to Ma Shashti. After Shashti Puja, the parents of the new-born must refrain from taking the puja offerings or *bhogs*. According to Sundarbans folk beliefs, to prevent evil wind from entering the body of a new-born child, the evil eye of various people, including ghosts, *maduli-tavij*, various roots, *najar fal* (fruits of a tree), pieces of iron, '*footo paysa*' (old copper coin) is

tied to the child's body, remembering the name of Ma Shashti. And mothers mark a point of *kajol* on the forehead, under the feet of the baby. After all if the mothers of Sundarbans are not assured about the safety of their new-borns before exiting, they spit on the baby's chest and gently bite the baby's little finger.

It should be mentioned in this context, although Shasthidevi is mentioned in various Puranas, she is not a Vedic Goddess. And it is to be noted that in Sundarbans, Goddess Shasti is worshipped as a folk goddess. From the various sources of information obtained from the 'Puranik Dictionary' (5th edition) compiled by Sudhir Chandra Sarkar, it can be said that this goddess is *Aryatar Devi* (a non-Aryan goddess). A part of *Adim* (old/ancient) *Matrika Puja* is called Shasthi Puja. Ma Sasthi is here the guardian of the new-born child, again this goddess is the goddess of fertility.⁸

In the event of the cremation of dead bodies also, some different features can be observed in the marginal society of Sundarbans. There are many beliefs and rituals in Sundarbans folk society surrounding the deceased. Before that, it should be said that throughout the twentieth century, almost everywhere in the Sundarbans, dead bodies were cremated on the deceased's *Vastu Vita* (Dwellingland). Because, since the time of settlement in the Sundarbans, no common crematorium, burial ground or graveyard has been built. What was built in the later period was insignificant and could not be used due to a lack of proper infrastructure. As a result, almost everywhere in the Sundarbans, the practice of cremation in one's own habitat is still considered normal. However, with the advancement of time, as the scope of *Vastu Vita* is getting smaller, recently (third decade of the twenty-first century), instead of *Vastu Vita*, there is an attempt to build a new common crematorium or cemetery somewhere in the Sundarbans. However, some Hindus, including the Scheduled Caste of the Sundarbans, do bury the dead body, but usually cremate the dead in pyres. Here, the tribals do the same now. However, Muslims and Christians bury the dead, and in most cases, this is done at one end of the deceased's *Vastu Vita*.

Several customs surrounding the dead are prevalent in the rural Sundarbans, from the belief that 'the soul is immortal' and reincarnation. Before and after taking the dead body to the crematorium, the people of Sundarbans perform certain rituals for the soul of the deceased. The dead body is laid in front of the house with the head facing north in the courtyard or open space. Apart from the usual rituals of putting *Tulsi* leaves on his closed eyes, filling his nose with cotton, and placing a religious book on his chest, there is a remarkable thing to be seen. A burning torch made of straw is placed near the head of the deceased. In the local language, it is called '*Nooro Jwele Deoya*.' Also, a shallow square hole about one to one and a half feet in size is dug near the feet of the lying person. In the local language, it is called '*Yam-Pukur*' (Pond of Yama). Before being taken to the crematorium, the dead person is smeared with raw turmeric juice mixed with mustard oil. But before that, the feet of the deceased are washed thoroughly, and washed in such a way that the foot-washing water falls into the Yama-pond which has been dug earlier. After cremation, the Yama-pond is filled with earth, and its surface is smoothed with water. Believing in reincarnation, the people of the Sundarbans believe that the imprint of the dead person's soul, whether human or non-human, will be imprinted on the smooth bottom of the Yama-pond. Keeping this belief in mind, the smooth floor of the Yama-pond is covered. If an impression is really seen within the next morning, then on seeing that impression, which can be thought of as an animal or a creature, the relatives of the deceased not only refrain from killing or harming that animal or creature but also feel deep compassion and spiritual attraction towards it. For example, if a bird's footprint was seen on the smooth bottom of Yama-pond. In that case, the relatives of that person refrain from hunting birds, hitting the birds, chasing them away, but try to caress them and provide them with food.

Some other cremation methods are also known to be prevalent in Sundarbans folk society. It is known from local people that if there is no ability or means to spend minimum expenses for cremation of the dead body, tying a brick or earthen urn to the dead body and immersing it in the river water has become an alternative method in the 20th century Sundarbans. If he dies at a very young age, if he is struck by lightning, or if he dies in a fire, the Hindus of the Sundarbans folk community bury him without cremation. Those who are Shaivites or Vaishnavas also have the custom of burying the dead. Again, in case of death by snake bite, the body is floated in the river on a *mandas* or raft of banana trees.⁹

Muslims and Christians bury the dead. But even in this case, since there is no common cemetery for these two communities in the Sundarbans, many people bury their dead relatives on one side of their *Vastu Bhita*.

The aborigines of the Sundarbans now cremate the dead, though in the past, they buried the dead in the ground. In this case, in another respect, the tribal of Sundarbans observe a different cremation ritual from Hindus. That is, Hindus pour the ashes of the dead in the Ganges, but the tribal here traditionally pour the ashes of the dead in the Damodar River instead of the Ganges.¹⁰

Finally, it can be said that a distinct social history emerges from the village life of the Sundarbans even by reviewing only a few social life events, such as family formation through marriage, birth and death. Be it the minimum age of marriage, the idea of birth control, and the method of childbirth or cremation of a person, a different history of backwardness emerges in the marginal public life of the Sundarbans. Through the review from the sociological point of view, the present article has brought out the unique social history of post-independence Indian Sundarbans centred on birth-death-marriage in marginal public life.

Notes and References:

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- 3) An Interview. Interview taken from – Golapsundari Baidya, W/O – Late Suryakanta Baidya, Age – 82 years, Scheduled castes, belonging to the Poundra community, Village + Post – Kanaikati, P.S. – Hingalganj. Date of Interview – 15/06/2014.
- 4) The bridegroom must be at least 21 years old; the bride must be at least 18 years old (The Special Marriage Act, 1954 replaced the old Act III, 1872 (Act. No. 43 of 1954, enacted by Parliament of India, dated 09th Oct.; 1954)
*Source: Special Marriage Act 1954, Pdf- www.google.co.in
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