

Dissemination of Cultural Heritage and Impact of Pilgrim Tourism at Gangasagar Island

Samira Dasgupta, Krishna Mondal and Krishna Basu

*Anthropological Survey of India, Govt. of India, 27. Jawaharlal Nehru Road,
Kolkata 700 016, West Bengal, India*

KEYWORDS Socio-Economic Changes. Tourist. Pilgrim Centers. Biosphere. Cultural Heritage

ABSTRACT Tourism plays a great role towards socio-economic changes. According to Indian sentiment the pilgrim centers or *tirthasthan* used to visit by number of tourists to earn virtue. Gangasagar is one of such centre where taking holy dip during makar sankranti, thought as, in life of a person earns that much of virtue which one can earn by visiting all the pilgrim centers throughout the life. The present paper aims to highlight the impact of pilgrim tourists at Gangasagar Island of Sundarban Biosphere and also projects the role of myth centering around Kapil Muni temple at Gangasagar which attracts not only tourists but also disseminate over the generation its cultural tenets which is valuable, being one of the repository of the great Indian cultural heritage.

INTRODUCTION

It is stated that according to Indian Cultural heritage one has to visit various *tirtha* or pilgrim center to earn virtue. Gangasagar is one of such famous pilgrim center where people criss-cross of the country being attracted and come to earn virtue. There is a proverb “*Sab tirtha bar bar Gangasagar ek bar*”-which means by taking holy dip only once in life a person earns that much of virtue which one can earn by visiting all the pilgrim centers throughout the life. This proverb signifies the importance of Gangasagar as a place of religious importance and ultimately it has got a position in the tourist map of India and thought as a place of religious tourism.

Gangasagar Island

Gangasagar is a place situated in the Sagar Island which is again located in the extreme south of Sundarban of the South 24 Parganas in the Diamond Harbour Sub-division. It is located between 21°36' to 21°56' north latitude and 88°2' to 88°11' east latitude. The island is surrounded by the Bartola or Muriganga river in the north and east, Hooghly river is flowing in the west and in the south by Bay of Bengal. Its area is approximately 224.3 sq.miles. In *Purana*, Sagar Island is called as *Patal*. In Bengal it is known as

Sagar dwip and it is the largest *dwip (island)* in the Bay of Bengal which encircles the island at its southern side. In the Sagar Island there are at least 44 villages of which Gangasagar is the largest one (Majumdar, 1971; Saha, 1999).

Table 1: Demographic and Economic Status of Sagar Island at a Glance

A. Population Status of Sagar Island*		
(i) Total Population (all community)		154202
(ii) Scheduled Caste :	Male	22127
	Female	21123
Population concentration		28.05%
Sex- Ratio		955
(iii) Scheduled Tribe;	Male	272
	Female	274
Population concentration		0.35%
Sex-Ratio		1007
(iv) a. Inhabited village/ Mouza		44
b. Total family		24638
c. Average Mouza size in terms of family		560
B. Occupational Status of Sagar Islanders* :		
(i) Cultivator		20161 (62.97 %)
(ii) Agri. Lab.		9783 (30.55%)
(iii) Others		2074 (6.48%)
(iv) Construction work as secondary economic pursuit		735 (55.18%)

*Source: B.D.O. of Sagar & Mandal, A.K. (2003).

The present paper intends to highlight about the tourism or pilgrim tourists' impact at Gangasagar (of Sagar island) of Sundarban Biosphere and how the mythology of Gangasagar attracts the people from distant places and disseminate through the generation its cultural tenets which is valuable, being one of the repository of the great Indian cultural heritage.

Correspondence Address: Dr (Mrs.) Samira Dasgupta, P-695. Lake Town, Block-A, Kolkata 700 089, West Bengal, India

E-mail: bhabbinimay @ yahoo.com

Mythological Importance

The place is primarily important for its temple of the great saint Kapil Muni who according to myth was Vishnu, had taken birth as per the wish of Kardam muni as his son. It is told that Kardam had to go through a marital life as per the direction of Vishnu but he agreed in a condition that Vishnu has to take birth as his son and as per this condition Vishnu had taken birth as his son and he was Kapil Muni—one of the great saint of Hindu religious mythology. Kapil Muni's hermitage was present at the place of the present day Gangasagar. His mythological story is related with the bringing of Ganga – the sacred river, in this place. In the myth it is told that once during his religious austerity King Sagar's (the King of *Ikshashu Vansh* of Ayodhya) 60000 sons came down to the place of his hermitage in search of their father's sacrificial horse and found it there at that place. In fact the horse was stolen by Devraj Indra and it was hidden by him at Patal beside Kapil's hermitage. Sagar's sons blamed him for the stealing of that and interrupted in his religious meditation. Then the saint became very angry and his blaze of anger came out of his eyes which burnt all the 60000 sons of the King Sagar into ashes and consigned their souls to hell until Sagar's grandson whose name was Bhagirath brought down the Ganga- Vishnu's wife as per the direction of the Saint-Kapil from heaven. With the touch of holy water of Ganga all 60000 sons were released from the curse and liberated their souls. Cognitive view of the local people is that Ganga in this place is known as Sagar and the point of junction of the river and the sea at the Sagar island is the celebrated seat of Hindu pilgrims (Maity, 2001).

It is told that Sagar King's sons were liberated from curse on the day of Makar Sankranti (Saha, 1999). Due to this the day became a very auspicious day to the Hindu pilgrims. On that day pilgrims from all over India come to take bath in the Gangasagar to get rid of all the sins and simultaneously to earn virtue. They also offer puja to the great saint-Kapil in his temple which is run by the Ramanandi saints of the Hanuman garhi of Ayodhya. Initially one of the zamindars of the then Sagardwip—Jaduram migrated from Midnapur appointed a priest from that group of saint of Ayodhya and ultimately after some times they demanded and established their claim over

the temple. According to them as the myth is related with Ayodhya and with the forefathers of Ram, it is their claim that they are the actual owner of the temple. During the time of holy bathing ceremony a large fair is held which is known as Gangasagar Mela. Except this great festival it is observed that throughout the year people come to visit the place primarily during different festive and ritual occasions and sometimes even when there is no such occasion.

PLACES OF INTEREST

Though the primary interest of the tourists is to take holy bath in Gangasagar and to offer puja to the saint – Kapil, but there are several other spots of attraction such as Sagar Light house, Solar plant, Wind mill, Deer park etc. and also Gangasagar's scenic beauty which attracts the tourists. Sometimes tourists even go to Jambu Dwip—the last land of Sundarban by hired mechanized boat crossing the turbulent river to get pleasure of the scenic beauty and to enjoy the adventure of crossing the turbulent river. It is found that Gangasagar is such a place where there are several temples, ashrams and maths and other religious centers of the Hindu pantheon. The tourists and the pilgrims specially who halt for two to three days there, from early morning to late evening visit those temples, offer puja, take prasad, listen to various religious congregation, songs recitations and even take part in meditation etc. along with taking bath in the Gangasagar, offering puja to Kapilmuni temple and to see the other places of tourist interest.

The Infrastructure Facility Available During Mass Pilgrimage Tourism and Its Impact

In Gangasagar the whole population is controlled by various beliefs and faiths of Hindu mythology. The place is unique due to its religious atmosphere, which is its cultural uniqueness and is disseminated among the tourist pilgrims and visitors through all those religious acts. Whenever a tourist takes part as listener he/she also gets some knowledge of Hindu religion and heritage.

In Sagar island the villagers are largely of Mahishya caste migrated from Midnapur along with Kaibarta, Paundra, Brahman, Baidhya, Kayastha and a very few Muslims. They are of opinion that tourism industry as an economic

source is very lucrative. The local people during the Gangasagar Mela earn a lot. To help the crowd during this festival, the West Bengal Government takes initiative every year. They arrange for the accommodation, sanitation, fooding, etc. all the infrastructure facilities for the tourists and pilgrims. The local people are appointed as skilled, unskilled, and semi-skilled workers in construction of road, yatriniabas, Hoghla cottages, latrine, bathroom etc. and hence they get opportunity to earn cash. There are several tea stalls, hotels. The owners of those have informed that the tourists and pilgrims have got the demand for hotels and tea stalls specially just after offering puja to the temple. To meet the demand gradually some hotels and tea stalls are opened by the local villagers and the people of the hinterland villages which is ultimately helpful for them as a lucrative source of cash earning.

In Gangasagar Mela Prangan, there are several small shops of temporary construction known as *dala mala dokan*. All these shops are owned by the villagers of the Gangasagar village and its neighbouring villages. *The dala mala dokans* are actually the shops of the materials essential as offering in the puja of Kapil Muni and to offer puja to Ganga Devi. Those are coconut, incense, lamp, *nakuldana* (a kind of sweet), flowers especially the garland of china rose flowers, iron bangles, conchshell, *kamandul*, pitcher, red thread, *pancha pradip* etc. Some fancy articles are also available in those shops. According to the shop owners this *dala mala* business is very profitable. Some of the items such as coconut, flowers etc. are collected from the locality. But most of the items are bought from the market of Kolkata and even Midnapur. It is found from the empirical data that their earned profit is largely invested in their agricultural field. In their cultivation process some changes have taken place. Now-a-days they are intended for cash crop cultivation like betel leaf, chilly etc.

As an impact of tourism it is observed that they have got channels for cash earning. There are tea stall, hotel owner, van rickshaw puller, auto drivers, STD shop owners. All of them are benefited due to tourist in flow and as a result they are also able to earn a lot from the tourists.

There are some photographers who earn a lot by taking snaps of the tourists as per their demand specially during festive occasion. Here at Gangasagar photography as an economic pursuit specially during Gangasagar mela is very much profitable. Case histories suggest that average

per day income is Rs.1000 to 1400 where average profit is Rs.550 to 625.

Again some of the local people have opened STD telephone booths to help the tourists and as a result it is also a profitable income source to them specially during festivals.

The tourists always have an interest to purchase some items as a memento of the spot. As per the demand of the tourists some fancy items are sold. In those shops very interestingly noted that there are shell and pearl items which are not at all the local items. These are brought from Midnapur. Genealogical data speaks that a large number of cultivating caste in Gangasagar village have migrated from Midnapur. There are several Zamindars who came here from Midnapur and brought several persons including subaltern with them for the development of the land for settlement of the people. Till date a matrimonial connection has been observed between Gangasagar and Midnapur. So it is easy for them to go and collect those stationary items from the place. Again pearl is brought from Hyderabad through middle man who have regular business network with the people at Midnapur and from whom they procure the required items.

Therefore, it can be said that tourism has opened several sources of cash earning and as a result several new occupations have emerged and got their position as inseparable elements for their subsistence.

Impact of Tourism on Socio-economic Life

As an impact of tourism the local people are fortunate to enjoy some infra-structural facilities. As for example, as per the demand of tourists and to give importance to the place, communication with Kolkata and other places are improving day by day. The transport service is developing, communication through water is developed. Several vessels and mechanized boats are there. The ferry ghat at Gangasagar is adequately developed. There is communication through water with Midnapur also. Communication within Sagardwip is also developed. There are several buses, mini buses, van rickshaws, auto etc. in this island. The telephone booths are also helpful for the local people.

Due to continuous flow of tourists at this island round the year changes are also observed in some other aspects of socio-cultural life. The young boys and girls in general have a tendency

to imitate the fashion, dress, style of conversion etc. of the tourists. The sartorial changes among the young generation of local population are often marked which is obviously an impact of tourism. During the festival it is very interestingly noted that local people in general are not so interested for the holy dip and offer puja in that particular Makar Sankranti festival. They want to avoid the crowd. But at the same time due to the attraction of *mela* (fair) they cannot resist themselves to visit and purchase items from the shops at *mela prangan*. Shops of various types of items are found (along with their local shops) which are brought from Kolkata and even from outside West Bengal, which all attract the people of Ganga-sagar. Among these items fashionable dress materials, shoes, sunglasses, cosmetics, artificial ornaments, household goods are very important. It is observed that the villagers who are not used to photography they also like to get their own photographs. During festival some fast food centers are opened which are liked by the locals specially of younger generation. In this way tourism has extended some impact on the material life of the local people, i.e., they have adopted cultural baggages of tourists.

Again the villagers argued that tourism has some negative influence on the village and its people. It is told that tourism has brought pollution in their both physical and social life. They say that young generation imitates the behaviors pattern of city life which sometimes even hurts the sentiment of the rural, traditional people. Often the tourists shameless behavior like, defecation openly in the road side and attend nature's call irritates the villagers. They think it has a very bad impact on the people of young generation.

Many times tourists come with hired women to enjoy the holiday and this type of cases are increasing day by day. A few case studies also suggest that sometimes even they want the village girls to spend with them at the cost of money. Many of the village girls get attracted to the money and are getting involved and due to this the villagers say that the village girls are becoming demoralized. The village boys are becoming alcoholic day by day which is also regarded by the villagers as a bad effect of tourism. Ganga-sagar is actually a place of saints, temples, *ashrams* and *maths*. Religious thoughts and dictums are dominantly controlling the society and people of Gangasagar. But due to the outsiders influence the truthness, the honesty, the

morality-all these are gradually going to be lessened. They are now becoming business minded. The older generation people opined that Gangasagar village's own identity is to run a simple life guided by religious beliefs and practices are lessened day by day in their society. They are becoming cunning. They have learnt to cheat the people. In this place along with gentlemen, thieves, pick pocketers and other antisocial elements come who spoil the social atmosphere of the place.

In the Gangasagar specially during the Makar Sankranti there is a huge crowd. Though the government assistance is there even then it is not sufficient. Due to the insufficiency of the latrine etc. the tourists sometimes use the village path as their toilet and the village path becomes very dirty. Again the beach of the Sagar is similarly used by the tourists. The villagers opined that after the Makar Sankranti festival local Government takes initiative to clear all the garbage even then the dirt is not totally clean. Bad smell is there in the air after the festival. Again, the path is full of rubbish, plastic packets, half eaten food etc. In this way the physical environment of the area also gets polluted specially during the festivals there is a gathering of school going children when they instead of going to school go to the Gangasagar to collect coins from the water which are thrown in the Sagar (sea) as an offering to Ganga Mata. They collect those and specially purchase cigarette. In this way small school going boys are in the trap of evil company which may ruin their future.

CONCLUSION

A nation's heritage is its cultural identity without which it would be an inanimate matter. Tourism can be considered of restoring the glorious past with all its patrimonies. The interest of tourism and heritage conservation are complementary and thus tourism and culture become partners in the developmental process (Singh, 1994). It is also reported by Singh (1994) through her study at Awadh that having a rich age-old tradition of religious tourism (or *tirthyatras*), India can prove to be a promising land for modern tourism.

Pilgrim who travel to this region usually practice the traditional Hindu scheme of *tirthyatras* which is essentially simple and austere in nature as they utilize only the basic and

minimum travel facilities on little or no cost (Singh, 1994). This observation is equally applicable in the present situation at Gangasagar.

According to Modi (2001) wish fulfillment was an important catalyst that had historically influenced travel. The human community, despite its highly developed capabilities, was always faced with problems that defied human solutions. The pilgrimage (tirthyatra) was therefore a journey undertaken for betterment both on the spiritual and the material plane.

Gangasagar is an orthogenetic village from where the great cultural heritage of our country is disseminated not only through the mythological account of the Great Saint-Kapil Muni but also from the local ashrams of various religious saints. Often the pilgrims come here and listen the narration of texts of Veda, Vedanta etc. It appears that economic development of this orthogenetic village is not only from the pilgrim visit but the pilgrim visit has accelerated or boosted the local agrarian economy among the villagers of Sagar Island. It has been found that again due to penetration of cash economy in the local agricultural economy, the agrarian caste groups are now becoming inclined for cash crop cultivation like betel leaf cultivation in the island. In spite of having certain negative sides as mentioned earlier, tourism industry as a whole is appreciated by these people and it has widened their knowledge of the outside world improving their economic life and exchange of cultural behaviour between the tourists and local people are obvious.

Thus, due to continuous flow of pilgrims and tourists at this land of Sundarban Biosphere the impact on the socio-economic life of the islanders are evident. The subsistence sector are becoming commercialized due to practice of cash crop cultivation. The tourist inflow at this island has also helped their transport and communication facility which also helped them in marketing their

agricultural produce even to Midnapur and Kolkata. The material world of the villagers has considerably changed. The villagers also have developed a positive outlook towards various types of immunization and vaccination, which is obviously a boon of tourism industry at this island.

The key elements of a pilgrimage are religious belief and knowledge within a particular socio-cultural context. In a country like India, where for the masses, tourism may not be economically feasible; the pilgrimage is a vital and living experience. Pilgrimage sites have also become important tourist destinations, because they are closely linked with the cultural identity and heritage of a destination like Gangasagar where also pleasure components are being added to the familiar pilgrim routes and itineraries.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This article is the outcome of Xth Plan Project (entitled "Cultural Dimension of Tourism"). Authors express their sincere gratitude to the Director-in-Charge, Dr. V.R. Rao of Anthropological Survey of India for inspiring in writing this paper for publication. Thanks are also due to Dr. Amitabha Sarkar, Anthropologist for his support with academic materials.

REFERENCES

- Majumdar, Ramesh Chandra (Ed): *History of Ancient Bengal*. Calcutta (1971)
- Maity, Jagannath: *Punyatirthya Gangasagar*. Ramakrishna Mission Ashram, Sagar (2001, in Bengali).
- Modi, Shalini: *Tourism and Society: Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Rawat Publication, Jaipur (2001).
- Mondal, A.K.: *The Sundarbans of India: A Development Analysis*. Indus Publishing Company, New Delhi (2003).
- Saha, Bikashkanti: *Mangrove Tigerland: Sundarban*. Intelsoft, Calcutta (1999).
- Singh, Shalini: *Cultural Tourism and Heritage Management*. Rawat Publication, Jaipur (1994).