

Jale Dangai: Exploring economic symbiosis and its consequent perils through a Bangla fiction

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Abstract

The dynamics of the riverine landscape and the marginalized people have mostly centred on conflicts and contingencies. The traditional fishermen in Bengal, mainly from the castes of *Jele Kaibartyas*, the *Malos*, the *Jhalos*, the *Bagdis*, and others, have been heavily dependent on the riverine resources for their daily needs and sustenance. Besides being a principal channel of transport, rivers and tidal landscapes have generated economy by being the prime source of resources to the population residing along the tidal landscapes. Reliability on the water bodies and riverine ecology has been the primary prism through which the economic symbiosis between nature and the subalterns has developed. It has, however been ambiguous, whether the dependency can be deemed profitable as the fishermen and boatmen have been living under extreme indigent conditions. The reason/s for the lack of materialization of the economic symbiosis in the imagined way can be located in the praxis of commercial activities that have been undertaken around the riverine and tidal landscapes. So, a crisis has been generated in the lives of the traditional lower caste fishermen who have been subtly manoeuvred to engage in the labour of catching fish from the rivers and seas and yet deprived of the benefit of their work. Thus, various forms and aspects of commercialism around the tidal landscapes of Bengal have generated difficulties for the traditional fishermen and boatmen.

Keywords: Artisanal fishing techniques, Economic symbiosis, Mechanized trawler systems, Open access fishing, Problems of overfishing, Tidal landscapes.

Introduction

The reliance on rivers and tidal landscapes for generation of economy has been a part of the history of Bengal for many centuries. Historically, the relationship between rivers and human settlements as viewed through the lens of economy has majorly pivoted around the use of the river as a medium of trade and transport since the beginning of the Portuguese settlement and consequent Mughal conquest of Bengal around the sixteenth century. The broad waterways present in the state of Bengal have provided an easy access to trade and commerce right from the sixteenth century as

the rivers have been recognized as flexible media of transport. Phanindra Nath Chakraborti has written how “Bengal’s advantageous location (and) lower cost of water transport” (Chakraborti 1984: 375) have been fundamental reasons for the growing commercial activities in the state which simultaneously allowed the Mughal rulers to “carry on oceanic trade” (*Ibid*) with other nations. A study of the economic history of the state has revealed that the Mughal reign in Bengal from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century had witnessed “an economic boom... owing to (an) expansion in the agrarian frontier, a flourishing textile industry, urbanization, trade with the western Gangetic plains, and Indo-European maritime trade” (Roy 2011: 115). Similar views have also been expressed by Richard M. Eaton who has noted:

Bengal’s agricultural and manufacturing boom coincided not only with the consolidation of Mughal power in the province but also with the growth in overland and maritime trade that linked Bengal ever more tightly to the world economy (Eaton 1993: 202-203).

So, right from the sixteenth century, rivers in the Gangetic delta and sea routes along the Bay of Bengal have contributed to the expansion of trade and commerce by providing easy navigation facility. The utilization of the river as tenable medium for expanding trade and economy has continued to extend till the colonial rule in Bengal. Debjani Bhattacharyya has mentioned how river Hooghly in Bengal has appeared “as a central highway of the British Empire... through which commodities such as salt peter, opium, salt, silk, cotton, jute, tea and rice moved from the east to the west” (Bhattacharyya 2018: 2). The reason for the utilization of seas and rivers for transportation, trade and commerce has been its expedient location and flow of the rivers, especially the Ganges and the Bhagirathi in deltaic Bengal, which has allowed direct trade with the west. In contrast to roadways, the infrastructural cost of the waterways has been negligible as the river channels, tributaries and their networks have already accounted for an existent infrastructure, allowing optimal utilization of river resources.

Tirthankar Roy has postulated that the river banks and the tidal landscapes, in contrast to the landscapes located in the slight interiors of Bengal, have emerged and evolved as the hub of economic activities especially during the colonial reign, (Roy 2011: 125), because the riparian territory opened up possibilities of new commerce and culture. The river banks had been comprehended as potential centres for developing an economic environment in the state, predominantly because the crucial rivers like the Ganges and the Bhagirathi remained navigable throughout the year. Thus, the rivers and the tidal landscapes have allowed the economic stability of the state especially in the pre-colonial and colonial times in India. It was chiefly Bhagirathi

which has been the centre of economic expansion during the colonial era as the factories built by the European companies in “Hooghly, Patna, Kasimbazar, Rajmahal, Chinsurah, Chandannagar and Serampore- were located on the Bhagirathi or the Ganges...” (*Ibid*: 126). Thus, the rivers and tidal landscapes had transformed from being storehouses of water, to one allowing and ensuring the penetration of economic growth and sustainability, tentatively at all levels of human society. So, right from the pre-colonial and colonial times, the rivers and tidal landscapes have been instrumental in economic development of the human settlements.

I

However, in the context of the lower castes and the tidal landscapes, traversing the territories of economic symbiosis has not been delimited to transport, trade and economic prosperity only. Timir Basu has mentioned how

despite its (fishermen) numerical strength and its vital contribution to state's economy, the fishing community continues to be 'backward' in every respect... Their incomes are abysmally low: like landless peasantry, they are what one might call fisheryless fishermen. (Basu 1978: 678)

Historically, the exhaustive intimacy between the riparian territory and the lower castes in Bengal had witnessed a transition in the colonial era when due to the interventionist implementation of the land reclamation policy in the nineteenth century, a large section of the lower caste fishermen and boatmen had taken to agriculture as a way of living. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay has mentioned about the *Namasudra* population of eastern Bengal, located mainly around the Faridpur, Bakarganj, Jessore and Khulna districts where they had maintained “an amphibious existence as boatmen and fishermen, ... (and later) had emerged as a settled peasant community by taking advantage of the land reclamations of the nineteenth century” (Bandyopadhyay 1990: 2563). Their peripheral amphibious existence as boatmen and fishermen had been tangential to the submergence of the marshy swamps of east Bengal for a considerable part of the year. Nonetheless, with the reclamation of these marshy areas and the expansion of peasantry, the *Namasudra* population had also settled as a community of cultivators. The gradual dissociation of the lower caste fishermen and boatmen from the riverine environment had been simultaneously bolstered by the changing colonial policy which had debarred the traditional fisher folks of free access to natural water sources and had brought about a vast change in the relationship between lower caste fishermen and the riverine landscapes.

In the post-independent years, the economic symbiosis between the tidal landscapes and the lower castes has been punctuated by the establishment of the fisheries sector and the initiation of the 'blue revolution' in the state. It is important to mention that the broad river systems in Bengal does not only comprise of rivers and seas, but also include small water bodies in the form

of *beels*, *pukurs* (or *pushkarinis*), tanks, canals and estuaries. Whereas rivers, seas and estuaries have been natural in their formation, tanks and canals are man-made. *Pukurs* and *beels*, on the other hand, form a part of the inland water bodies. It is this diversiform and expansive system which has allowed the development of a well-developed fisheries sector in Bengal. Sib Ranjan Misra has mentioned that statistically, India has the reputation of being the second largest producer of inland fish production, right next to China, and the fisheries sector in India has the capacity to generate employment and livelihood “as it stimulates the growth of a number of allied industries and also is a source of cheap animal protein” (Misra 2006: 13). The development of the fisheries sector and its ancillary industries has been significant in the context of the lower castes/lower classes as “this sector is eminently suited to assist a large mass of backward and economically weaker section of rural community” (*Ibid*: 16). Ideally, such broad networks of the fisheries sector would have resulted in a strong economic foundation for the lower castes, acting as a panacea to their existential plight, but it has not materialized in the imagined way.

As an example of growing commercial activities around the tidal areas in the state, Timir Basu has noted about the existence of *bheris* (large and artificial water bodies used for commercial fish breeding) owned by absentee landlords in Bengal which “are run on somewhat commercial basis, employing fishermen on daily rates” (Basu 1978: 678) and paying a meagre amount for their labour. As such, increasing dominance of commercial activities around the riverine environment and the precedence of monopolization of natural resources by the upper caste/class people over the common use of the riverine environment have driven the marginalized fishermen and boatmen to an onerous situation. Often ecological and economic predicaments have been the consequences of the adaption and application of industrial techniques of fishing for commercial purposes, replacing the traditional methods leading to increased exploitation of natural resources. Unfettered implementation of various processes of mechanization around the tidal landscapes has been the primary reason which has jeopardized the economic stability of the lower caste boatmen and fishermen as well as destabilized the symbiosis between the subalterns and nature. The introduction of modern methods of fishing for commercial purposes has led to an eventual distancing between the traditional subaltern fishermen community and the riverine landscapes of Bengal. The inception and adoption of the trawler system- an embodiment of mechanization for commercial benefits, has shown how economic fragmentation of the lower caste fishermen has been a derivative of the lack of cohesion and inclusivity in commercialization around the riverine. The induction of the trawlers for fishing has engendered a sense of critical urgency in the lives of

the traditional lower caste fisher folks of Bengal. This sense of urgency has also been mirrored through the undermining of the process of economic symbiosis.

II

Providing a critique of the same, Gobindo Shoundo's *Jale Dangai* (translated as *On Water and on Shore* by Subhajit Sen Gupta) has presented the exploitative practices of a prominent section of people, who capitalize on the labour of traditional fishermen and have deprived the original artisanal fisher folks of their due credit. The narrative of Shoundo's fiction has juxtaposed the approach of few traditional fishermen with the ware house owner Nagen Sharma (representative of the dominant exploitative class) and has portrayed how the latter has fulfilled his dream of setting up cold storages by robbing off the profit money earned by the hard-physical labour of the fishermen. The narrative has primarily dealt with the exploitation of the lower caste fishermen at the hands of the affluent people. Underlying the primary representation, the narrative has also highlighted the ill effects of supplanting of the artisanal fishing techniques with the trawler system and the setting up of cold storages in post independent India. The introduction of the trawler system for fishing techniques can be read as a step towards commercialization of riverine ecology which will benefit the fisheries sector. The fiction has shown how the materialization of the trawlers to catch fishes in the deep sea has resulted in the increase of the catch. But such developments have not been without their adverse effects for it has resulted in the complexities of storage as well as problems of overfishing. Added with the obvious problems, it has also led to a gradual breakdown of symbiosis between nature and the lower caste fishermen, as the earlier treasured relationship has been replaced with a mechanized version of fishing. Not only this, the dominance of modern techniques of fishing, largely due to commercial purposes has also initiated a monopoly of the upper caste/class over fishing techniques as they can afford to buy or access such mechanisms leaving out the marginalized population from accessing them.

Commercialization and mechanization have been attributed to be at fault for the environmental complications that have also crept on to the shores of the seas in Bengal. Partly, such environmental issues have echoed what Gandhi had said about the effects of Western duplication of industrialization in India. Ramachandra Guha, while elaborating on Gandhi's perspectives on tradition and modernity has mentioned his words:

God forbid that India should ever take to industrialization after the manner of the West. The economic imperialism of a single tiny island kingdom (England) is today keeping the world in chains. If an entire nation of 300 million took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts (Rangarajan 2007: 114-115).

Shoundo's fiction, in such a context, can be read as an attempt to decipher the aftermaths of industrialization, a process by which traditional methods of fishing has been replaced by the commercial method. The introduction of the trawler system along with the arrangements of the cold storages has indicated a possible and gradual transitional phase of fishing- from a basic unit of sustenance to an industrial commodity. The use of the trawlers will allow passage to more distance during the catching season, and cold storages will permit a continuous supply of fish to meet the market demands. Thus, fishing- traditionally associated with a lower caste profession, has become a medium for industrial and economic growth of a dominant group. But the condition of the lower caste fishermen has remained unchanged. They have been deployed for their labour, yet their labour has remained unpaid. Irrespective of the industrial development of fishery and pisciculture as an important sector of economic prosperity in India, the lower caste *Jeles* have not experienced social and economic emancipation.

In this context, Kurien and Achari have observed how the fisheries sector has been one of the effective contributors to the national rural economy. To augment the sector's contribution, the model of 'modernization growth-oriented' development has been adopted which has implied the "superimposition of a modern, capital-intensive, specialized technology over the existing traditional base which was largely labour-intensive and of great technical diversity" (Guha 1994: 219). Such impositions have led to the displacement of artisanal fishing techniques with trawlers and fishing gears. But to assume that mechanization and development have led to stabilization of their (traditional lower caste fishermen) economic condition would be wrong as they have been deprived of their customary amount and money required for livelihood. To quote Gupta and Sharma:

The owners of mechanized trawlers and aquaculture farms and those who have economic and political power in society have actually grown stronger. The state and powerful private interests monopolise resources and control the markets. The elites of the fishing industry deny the fisherfolk control over resources, markets and decision-making on which their livelihoods depend. (Gupta and Sharma 2004: 3008)

One can conclude that with the induction of the trawler system, there has been a broadening of the interstitial divide between the owners of the trawlers and the lower caste fishermen, along with the complete dismissal of artisanal techniques. Economic symbiosis, which had been earlier reliant on the use of the riverine resources for sustenance, has changed meaning into an overarching ideology of profiteering, surprisingly excluding the traditional fisher folks of

Bengal. Added to the economic destabilization, problems of over-fishing in the coastal areas of India have also emerged as dominant ecological problem due to the use of trawlers. Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha have observed:

Until independence the coastal waters of India were fished by artisanal fisher folk employing rowing boats and sailing boats, with the fish consumed largely along the coastal towns and villages... The fisheries development effort following independence supported mechanization, with the introduction of trawlers and purse seiners, the development of cold storage and canning facilities and the promotion of export of marine products (Gadgil and Guha 1995: 16).

III

With the increase in mechanization procedures, there has been an enhancement in catching fishes, prawns and shrimps along the coast, enabling the exchange of foreign currency, as fishes, shrimps and prawns are exported to foreign nations, subsequently leading to the development of the fishing industry. But alternately, such modern techniques have also resulted in over fishing and coastal pollution. In Shoundo's narrative too, new techniques of trawler fishing and mobilizing water resources have resulted in a paradigmatic shift in the ways of fishing. Shoundo has mentioned about the elaborate arrangements made by Nagen Sharma to capitalize on the selling of fishes. The detailed arrangements of introducing the launch, the quick distribution of profit money between the fishermen and the launch-owner, the swift storing of the fishes in the warehouses are all part and parcel of the new industrial ways of fishing which have crept in the new millennium. Shoundo has written:

Warehouse-owner Nagen has his launch on the water and his lorry on the shore. It lacked only an ice-manufacturing machine... The lorry arrives immediately to carry away the catch of fish, whatever the quantity... Crushed ices, the chests, the packing, all got ready like clockwork (Singha and Acharya 2012: 67).

Such mechanistic and commercial approach towards fishing has definitely increased the quantity of catch but at the same time it has also led to an exploitation of the labour of the lower caste fishermen. With the introduction of cold storages and ware houses, fishermen can store the excess catch to be sold as and when the price increases. So, from a medium of assuaging protein deficit, fish and fish products have become commodities which can be utilized for generation of profit. Such economic desires have led to overfishing as there is no threat of decaying. The narrative has presented two situations, one where due to overfishing and lack of cold storages, the fishermen were forced to dispose the rotten fish. While Nagen Sharma, in the narrative, views the catch as a part of his "chain bijnesh" (*Ibid*: 64) the fishermen have been more sensitive towards

their catch. Sashi, the protagonist in Shoundo's story had mentioned about an incident where due to the fear of the sanitary inspector, the fishermen had to dispose the rotten *ilish* because it was stinking. They had to "dug up the ground and buried the big, broad-bellied *ilishes*, all of which had rotted..." (*Ibid*: 67) with their own hands. They had experienced a sense of poignancy in doing so, as if they were burying their own children. So, mechanization of older techniques, especially the introduction of trawlers and cold storages has led to easy arrangements of fishing and storages, but it has caused an environmental degradation due to over-fishing along the coast lines and the sensitivity and poignancy associated with the traditional work has been replaced by a more mechanistic version.

The gradual collapse in the traditional methods of fishing with the new trawler system has also led to the breakdown of symbiosis between the lower castes and the ecological components. John Kurien and T R Thankappan Achari in their seminal work regarding overfishing in the coastal region of Kerala had pointed out various reasons for the acceleration of the marine fishery sector of Kerala during the 1950s and 1960s and their gradual decline post 1974. Due to 'open access nature' which allowed fishing by people even outside the fishing community, rapid introduction of trawlers as well as a quick displacement of traditional fishing techniques with new mechanized forms, people had applied destructive methods along the coastline of Kerala to harvest prawns. In spite of the prawn harvest yielding high returns, the 'artisanal fishermen' had benefitted peripherally (Guha 1994: 219-222). A similar opinion has been voiced by Debal Deb as well, who in his study of two fishermen communities of Karnataka, has mentioned how:

the introduction of mechanized crafts and correspondingly mechanized techniques, the frequency of individual as well as group ownership of modern fishing equipment has increased among the wealthier section of the fishing communities. Even non-fishing castes have begun investing in the fishing business... (Deb 1996: 112).

The intrusion of non-fishing community in to the affairs of the artisanal fishermen has been an attempt of appropriation of the artisanal fisher folk labour for deriving profit and a gradual inception of monopoly where the upper caste, non-traditional fishermen have been appropriating the riverine resources according to their whims and fancies. Much similar to the 'open access nature' which has resulted in over fishing in the coastal areas of Kerala, the unbridled licence given to anybody in Bengal to initiate a fishing business can also be interpreted in terms of inching closer to environmental destruction.

Kurien and Achari have further elaborated:

Technical barriers, such as the need to have fishery specific skills, and social barriers like fishing being the occupation of a lower caste, prevented free entry of capital and persons from outside the traditional fishing communities into the fishery. The introduction of mechanized boats and the perceived profit opportunities in prawn exporting changed this scenario considerably... Rapid entry was facilitated by the free access to the sea: mechanized boats could be operated without any form of licence or registration (Guha: 1994: 222)

In the context of the narrative, people like Nagen Sharma have utilized the 'open access nature' to exploit the river and the labour of the human beings for catching more fish and generating profit from its sale. The breakdown of the symbiosis and its replacement with a mechanistic treatment of ecological elements has been exhibited by contrasting the perspectives of traditional fishermen and the ware house owner towards fish. With the intrusion of non-fishermen caste in to fishing industry, the dominance of traditional fishermen on their own product (fish) has been destabilized. Thus, overfishing as a consequence of commercialization has been detrimental not only to the marine life, but it has gradually led to an increased commercialization of natural component, and the lower caste/ class are deprived of their right. They have ended up becoming pawns at the hands of their masters.

IV

Very ironic is the fact that with the introduction of new mechanistic techniques of fishing, it is the fishermen who have been deprived of the value of their labour. In *Jale Dangai*, Sashi's laboriously caught *ilish* is scarcely compensated. Their rough hands and chipped fingers bear the bruises endured from the fishing nets "by having to constantly open the knots on the fishing nets" (Singha and Acharya 2012: 69) and yet when the time comes to get the payment for their labour, they become the peripheral beneficiary. Nagen Sharma in *Jale Dangai* has become the representative of the profit conscious category of the local population whose only concern has been to maximize benefit from the *ilish*. Thus, *Jale Dangai* has elaborated the consequences of excessive commercial activities around the riverine areas in the form of overfishing and how such activities have rendered not only nature (rivers) barren, but also engendered a crisis in the lives of the lower castes at multiple levels.

The setting up of cold storages and warehouses to preserve *ilish* for longer days has also raised pertinent questions about the compliance of these warehouses to the environmental standards. The mushrooming of cold storages and warehouses without adhering to the guidelines

of environmental policies have been a violation of the operating principles as mentioned in 'Environment and the New Economic Policies', a speech given by Dr. Manmohan Singh, the Finance Minister in 1992. Guha in *Environmentalism* had mentioned about the 1992 speech of the contemporary Finance Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh who had categorically stated about the "effective system of verification and industry audit and heavy penalties for non-compliance with approved environmental standards and norms" (As mentioned in Ramachandra Guha, *Environmentalism: A Global History*. p. xiv). One can speculate that Nagen Sharma's warehouse and the cold storage do not comply with the environmental standards and yet no one has questioned him about his illegality for they also partake from the profit. Thus, development through mechanization of older methods has not changed the livelihood of the lower castes and ecological balance of the environment has been hampered too.

Conclusions

The introduction of the mechanistic trawler system has then, exposed the lop-sidedness of the "complex matrix of unequal economic distribution of wealth and capitalist relations in the coastal areas" (Gupta and Sharma 2004: 3006), where the traditional lower caste fishermen have occupied the lowest position. Fishing, which had been earlier, a subsistence-based occupation for the lower caste artisanal fishermen has transformed into an example of the growing capitalist economy, where the laborious works and "risks are outweighed by profit" (*Ibid*: 3007). It is interesting to mention that the transplantation of the mechanistic way of fishing using a trawler, replacing the earlier traditional methods has not only led to jettisoning of the economic concerns of the fishermen, it has also led to a painful realisation of the fishermen about their depravity and lack of power, with mostly an anguished acceptance of their harrowing lives. One can define their life as a series of 'lacks'- "greatly weakened from increasingly sustainable livelihoods, from alienation, from lack of use rights, from loss of common property resources, and from lack of easy alternatives." (*Ibid*: 3008)

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