

Socio-Ecological Significance Of Gangasagar Mela In West Bengal

Mrs. Ipsita Chakraborty^{1*}, Dr. P. Ganesan², Dr. Debaprashad Chatterjee.³

¹Research Scholar, Dept. of Sociology and Social Work, Annamalai University, Tamil Nadu. (Cell: 8250393968; mail id: chakrabortyipsita448@gmail.com)

²Assistant Professor, Dept. of Sociology and Social Work, Annamalai University, Tamil Nadu. (Cell: 9443399633, mail id: mapaganesan@gmail.com)

³Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Moulana Azad College, Kolkata, West Bengal. (Cell: 7003907167, mail id: debaprashad@gmail.com)

*Corresponding Author: Mrs. Ipsita Chakraborty

¹Research Scholar, Dept. of Sociology and Social Work, Annamalai University, Tamil Nadu. (Cell: 8250393968; mail id: chakrabortyipsita448@gmail.com)

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Abstract

Gangasagar Mela is a religious mela in West Bengal. This mela take place in time of the Poush Sankranti, mainly the end of month Poush according to Bengali year calender. Though this tipulated sacred date is well known in West Bengal for taking a *Holy Bath*, in popular sense the Gangasagar bathing is known as Baruni. Gangasagar is a one of the major and famous festival in Bengal as well as in India. In West Bengal, bengali people celebrates this festival very gorgeously and colourfully, because in time of the Gangasagar mela a very popular festival take place which is known as *Nabanna* (festival of new rice). In this Nabanna people prepared various kinds of pies and cakes. Though Gangasagar is the matching up as well as meeting point of the river Ganga and Bay-of -Bengal. So, most of the people of East-West and North India have strong believe that after a long journey of upward and downward slope Maa Ganga have met with her Husband in Gangasagar. That's why Gangasagar mela is not only religious importants but also it has great importance on social, ecological.

'Sab Tirtha Bar Bar, Gangasagar Ekbar'

(The Virtues acquired from other holy places several times is equivalent to the virtue acquired from visiting Gangasagar only once)

❖ INTRODUCTION:

Mela is an assembles of people by any religious or other festivals. Any kind of Mela has great importance for its cultural, societal and economical point of view. The culture of India is a synthesis-material, intellectual and spiritual. Everything is inclusive in it. India is a land of assimilation. A unity of character and attitude makes the manifold a single unit and preserves balance of individual and social demands. The spiritual foundations of Indian culture were laid during the Vedic period; the Jaina and Buddhist movements paved to spread the accumulated spiritual wealth among the masses. Every aspect of Indian life is pervaded by religious assumptions; vitality of India lies in religion. The Vedas a collection of religious hymns for social and spiritual values and the Upanishads contain the profound philosophical speculations that human mind has ever conceived. The streams of Indian culture- the Vedic, the Puranic has developments in philosophical works, epics, drama, poetry and sciences contributed in the improvement of human cognitive and conquest of internal nature. As men lives in an area it develops a symbiotic relationship with the ecology of that area. Religious values are essential for understanding and toleration, moral responsibility for protecting ecology and society. During the time period of Gangasagar mela, inhabitant of this locality have a strong desire to earn something by rendering their service to pilgrims.



*Pilgrims

❖ GANGASAGAR MELA: AN OVERVIEW

Myth- Gangasagar or Sagar Island a tract of land cut from the mainland creates an unparalleled religious ambience with vast swathes of silver sands, clear sky, deep blue ocean and iconic Kapil Muni Ashram. According to legends, Sage Kardam Muni was an adherent devotee of lord Vishnu and dedicatedly followed his every direction. Pleased with his fealty, Vishnu granted his wish and took birth as his and Devahuti devi's child, Kapil Muni. Kapil Muni, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu attained an unfathomable knowledge of the Vedas in his early years. His name was immortalised across the world as the founder of Samkhya philosophy in Hinduism. The sheer force of Ganga cascading Vishnu's toe would obliterate the earth, Bhagirath pleaded to lord Shiva to calm down the fall of Ganga. Shiva was pleased with Bhagirath's prayer He agree to take the full force of the river on his matted hair. Ganga lost her force in the meandering maze of Shiva's hair and descended gently on earth, saving existence. The holy water of Ganges liberated the souls of 60,000 sons from damnation. With passing years Ganga was given the name of Bhagirath after Raja Bhagirath and seas got it's name 'Sagar' after Sagar Raja. The island was formed by the holy confluence of Ganga and Sagar significant as Sagarwip.

Location- Gangasagar mela lies about 100 km from Kolkata on the southern tip of Gangetic delta, under the jurisdiction of South 24 Parganas, West Bengal. Gangasagar is a tract of land cut from the mainland creating an unparalleled religious ambience with vast swathes of silver sands, clear sky, deep blue ocean and iconic Kapil Muni Ashram. In these shores, the holy Ganges meets the ocean after journey of thousands of kilometres.

Time period- Gangasagar mela is held during the auspicious period of Makar Sankranti. The Hindu calendar is luni solar calendar where adjustments are regarding the lunar and solar cycles to keep track of seasons. It is held usually in the mid of January around 14th -15th of the month. The word Makar is the first day of the solar month when the sun enters the Makar rashi phase and corresponds with the sun sign Capricorn. The other word Sankranti, refers to the transition of the sun from one phase to other. Among the 12 Sankrantis in total, Makar and Karka are of massive significance in religious beliefs.

Rituals- The popular hymns “**Sab Tirtha Bar Bar, Gangasagar Ekbar**” has been immortalized in the heart of every pilgrim who in every year travel across the length and breadth of the country to reach the sacred shores of the Gangasagar. The gravities of the Gangasagar are beautifully encapsulated by the spirit of the devotees who belief that a dip in the holy Ganges will help them to attain Moksha or Salvation. During the hours, the earthy scent of incense filling the dense January air. The bells chiming loud in sync with mantras spreading a mystic charm all around. Devotees offer prayers to lord Surya and perform 'tarpan' in remembrance of their ancestors and in the hope that souls will be freed from the mortal world. The overwhelming sound of the collective chanting of mantras, the stunning sight of innumerable diyas floating in the river, the whiff of righteousness and unshakeable faith in the air make for an exclusive transcendental experience. During this, various sweet dishes are made at Indian households comprising fresh ingredients like sesame and jaggery. The unmistakably elaborate rituals performed by the reclusive ash smeared, dreadlocked Naga Sadhus add to the mysticism of the celebrations. After completion of this ritual, they congregate at Kapil Muni Ashram to perform the maha pujas and yajnas in memorising the powerful saint and sought for his blessing. The Naga Sadhus bless the devotees who visit them by carrying out performances that inspire awe. The pilgrimage in Gangasagar is a reflection of the fascinating journey from Samsara to Nirvana, a journey that has captivated many. The teeming multitude of Gangasagar mela is a visual insight of man's relentless quest from mundane to spiritual.

Cultural importance- Indian is a land of multicultural emphasising on social fabric. Among the religion practiced in India, Hinduism is the largest with 80% of the Indian populace adhering to it. The Gangasagar mela is one of largest Hindu festivals in India is celebrated each year. This is the significant spiritual carnival of country next to Kumbh mela in northern India. It is held to celebrate the legend and had turned the island into a cultural landmark that is thronged by people, irrespective of ethnic identities, keen on witnessing the customs associated with the fair.

Climatic change- During this religious congregation, climate undergoes remarkable change. Held after winter solstice on this when days starts to get longer and nights get shorter. This reflects an intrinsic tie between jyotisha practices and astronomical movements. Since Vedic times, the ancient system of knowledge has been guiding for a civilization and is relevant even today.



*Naga Sadhus

❖ SOCIAL AND ECOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF GANGASAGAR MELA

Harmonious development of an individual requires that we should cooperate and live with each and other members of community and also with nature or environment or ecology. Socio-ecology is a discipline of sociology dealing with study of all aspects of reciprocal relations between man and environment. The geological, geographical and biological factors work together to produce an ecological zone. Ecological conditions by social, economic and political factors. Ecological relations among the humans are similar with those among lower organisms. The ecological standpoint in which man's strivings, aspirations and ideals mingle with ecological forces and social ecology stresses ever complex give-take relationship between man and region.

Pilgrimage- Not only in West Bengal but also from various parts of the country and abroad visits this holy place during Makar Sankranti last day on the month of Poush. Devotees go there mainly to take a sacred bath during this time. (This Makar Chan festival is popularly known as 'Baruni'). On the occasion of this holy bathing, the pilgrims meets here from distant places.

Gathering- Pilgrims visits Gangasagar mela from Bihar, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Gujarat, Punjab and other states of India. Though among the pilgrims of Gangasagar mela, Sadhus and saints are the main pilgrims. It is unique that all over India even in each temple are organised, maintained and worshipped by Brahmins but in Gangasagar Mela it is worshipped and maintained by sadhus and saints. To organise a systematic mela and to help pilgrims collectively as to provide health facility, shelter, clothing, medicine, transportation-communication totally those above said responsibilities are held by our West Bengal government. Even during the time of bathing various safety measures have been taken by our government like employing, military force and rendering other welfaristic services.

Culture- (Bengali and non-bengali culture)- Gangasagar mela is not only a festival but also is a conjunction of great cultural heritage. Various pilgrims of several states and culture become acculturated in this holy mela and all the pilgrims are known and conscious about their own culture and also are obeying the pilgrims of other culture. So, an enculturation as well as cultural mixing is taking place in Gangasagar mela.

Economical importance- Gangasagar is an island of South 24 Parganas and West Bengal. This island have had emerged newly so it is not so fertile and have not so cultivation. Thus, most of the residents mainly poor people have maintained their family by small enterprise, small seasonal business during the time of Gangasagar mela. This mela has dual importance: one is the pilgrims and similarly local residents have a long wait for this mela because it is the primary means of their fundamental subsistence.

Worship- During the bathing, most of the devotees worship with probably a small amount of gold and silver if possible, coins, fruits, flowers, garlands etc. They pray to Maa Ganga for their own family and others the betterment of them.

Offerings- During worship of holy Ganga, fruits, devotees offers sweets, garlands, conch shell, shakha and pola. Pilgrims buy 'dala' of worship materials from the stalls or shops situated in front of the Kapil Muni Ashram which is common and mandatory.

Ecological importance- In Hinduism, river Ganga is considered not only as a mere river but also treat her as their mother figure. As mother helps her children in various aspects similarly Ganga is a water stream which is helping commercially, economically, religiously and most importantly ecologically. Not only in Gangasagar but also from Gangotri to Gangasagar in her total streaming way she has great contribution to protect human life and for the sustainable contribution to environment. Thus, in Gangasagar pilgrims never create any kind of pollution with their religious wastage materials. West Bengal government has taken prevent plastic pollution and save the environment from the hazards after the mela is over every year. The government has provided various preventive measures to control and check pollution and contamination. So, they have arranged for bins, wastage bins, mobile toilets and urinals and other health hazards controlling measures. The director feels these efforts from the government have indeed saved the place from getting more polluted after the fair. Not only government initiatives, the local inhabitants surrounding the Gangasagar mela are very much conscious and aware regarding the traditions, importance of the mela. So, they spontaneously serve their voluntary service and help to preserve and conserve the ecological balance. Especially, Gangasagar mela is unique because there has no such mandatory offering norms and rituals; it is famous for the bathing ritual, so here no offering system and no question of pollution by the wastage of offering materials.



• Kapil Muni's Temple

❖ CONCLUSION:

In present times, communication and transportation has developed a lot since past, where has several adventurous and very cautious story on Gangasagar mela. At that time, pilgrims used to bay the river and to reach the mela they hired boat. Though this type of boat was not so safety for their sailing appropriately. So, several times many boats got sunk carrying with lot of visitors. At this time, by the development of transportation and communication system visitors are hiring big vessels and machine launch as these are more safety and comfortable. None of the religion can keep itself aloof from the milieu of what is happening around and do something to mitigate human suffering. Sufferings or problems may be physical or mental or at times both. Religion purports a panacea for all troubles; it can change man's life and conduct altogether. Religion removes disparities from society, it insists on equality of treatment for all the idea of any discrimination being made between one community and another; an individual and another; on grounds of race, religion or any ground is repugnant to it. Religion preaches unity among these disparities, religion is content with merely preaching this ideal then it is self-defeating. Unity in action is needed along with justice, peace and progress. A society is religious to extent it acts in accordance with declared intentions in the name of religion. Religion helps to wipe out inequality; religion concerns itself with aspects of human welfare moral and material. The dichotomy of moral and material is illusory one cannot exist without the other. None of the human endeavour fails within the purview of religion. The purpose of religion is to inspire man constantly to strive for perfection both individually and collectively.



*location of Gangasagar

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