

# COASTAL BENGAL: WHERE THE LIFE FLOATS WITH FLOWS

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**Abstract:** The present study is an attempt to look for the present scenario of coastal life of West Bengal. The ecology has a great impact on the social life and the mental health of the people of those areas. It is also tried to understand that the involvement of Government to the different kinds of developmental programmes and benefits and the kind of help and supports in different emergency situations provided to them from the different layers of society. This study also intended to show that, how the livelihood and occupation of many coastal people differs from others which enrich the economy, art, crafts etc of West Bengal.

**Keywords:** Coastal Life, Ecology, Livelihood, Occupation, Economy.

## I. Introduction

Coastal Bengal is a crucial and significant part of West Bengal in terms of culture, art, craft, administrative purposes, geographical location, communication systems, infrastructure and so on. The coastal Bengal is generally known as those regions which are located on the bank of the Bay of Bengal. The Bay of Bengal is the north-eastern part of the Indian Ocean, bounded on the west and north-west by India, on the north by Bangladesh, and on the east by Myanmar and the Lakshadweep and Andaman and Nicobar of India. Later during the British India, it came forth as the Bay of Bengal after the historic Bengal region, as the Port of the Kolkata served as the gateway to the Crown rule in India. Cox's Bazar, the longest sea beach in the world and Sundarbans, the largest mangrove forest and the natural habitat of the Bengal tiger, are located along the bay. Mainly the Southern parts (West and East Midnapore and South 24 Parganas) of West Bengal witness the coastal regions of this state.

Coastal regions of any state have a great significance and influence on the livelihood of the local people, economy, geographical position and so on. In spite of having all these advantages, the coastal regions not always benefitted for the states. Sometimes these regions become the cause of serious tensions for the local inhabitants and government. Almost every year the people of these places face lots of crisis because of natural disaster and having under developed areas. Having lots of significance (in terms of all the above mentioned phenomena including agriculture) of these areas it is often seems that may be no one (administrations) cares about their conditions and in many cases they are just taken for granted even by themselves. So, it is necessary to understand its impact on different layers of society and the pros and cons of these areas.

Under this background the author would like to describe how coastal areas influence various aspects and the gravity of these areas to us.

## II. Objective

The fundamental objective of the study is to understand the importance, significance and impact of the coastal areas of West Bengal and its people to the Government, ecology and culture.

## III. Methodology

The study area is the different parts of West and East Midnapore and North 24 Parganas has been purposively selected. Ethnography was used to pursue this study. The data have been collected through semi-structured interview, case studies, researcher's own observation and experience. Besides, information through different secondary sources also collected. Convenience and snowball sampling was used during the fieldwork.

#### **IV. The Floated Life:**

According to the objective of the study, the author has tried to show some significant association between the coast and the people of surrounding places. As the author mentioned earlier, coastal parts provide some advantages. But the coin has other side too. One thing is needed to mention here. As the coast and its adjacent areas is the part and parcel of the lives of local people. So, it is obvious that the spheres which have an impact of sea definitely influence the lifestyle, livelihood of people. The different spheres where the coastal region of Bengal has an impact are mentioned below.

#### **V. Impact on Ecology and Livelihood**

The author would categorize the coastal areas of Bengal mainly in two parts, i.e. sea beaches and the other one is Sundarban areas. The sea beaches are mainly found the districts of East Midnapore and the other part is located in the North 24 Parganas.

##### **5.1 Impactful Livelihood**

Livelihood of the people of coastal areas is greatly influenced by and depends on the environment of the coastal regions. The scenario in the West Bengal is not exceptional. Most of the people of these areas choose that occupation which directly relied upon the lives of coast.

There are a group of people who are known as fishermen. They are found in both the areas of coastal Bengal. They either have their own boat or they hired boat for fishing in deep sea. It is not their occasional or monthly or weekly job; they do it regularly (apart from someday on which they are told to not go to the sea because of natural calamity). They usually go in late night and come back in the dawn. The fishes which are brought are sold in the nearest market or to the local people.

On the other hand, people of these areas also relied on tourism to sustain their lives. There are various hotels and restaurants, holiday homes and resorts, shops of different art and handicrafts are operated by the local people. Besides, lots of people engaged in local transportation or boat service for showing sight scenes.

Apart from them, particularly on Sundarban many people (mainly villagers) who are solely dependent on the collection from the forest. They collect honey, leaves, woods etc from the forest areas (Sundarban). People also collect crabs. But these people have risk of life too. It is often reported that the people who went to the forest for those above mentioned purposes, some of them are died or injured due to the attack of tiger(s). But the villagers have to take these kinds of risks almost every day.

##### **5.2 Impactful Ecology**

The seashore along with sea is an integral part of the coastal ecology. Every year the coastal parts witness the breeding of various species of different marine animals. They (coastal regions) are also responsible to maintain the bio-diversity of these areas. Besides, these areas also experience the appearance of different species of plants and mangrove. The appearance of the largest mangrove forest (Sundarban) has an impact to the ecology in a great extent.

###### **5.2.1 Sundarban: A Natural Watchman**

Sundarban, which is the biggest mangrove forest of the world, is located in the shore of Bay of Bengal. Undoubtedly, the way it maintains the biodiversity and keeps ecology healthy, hardly any other parts of West Bengal can do. But today, the forest is in a great danger. Hundreds of trees (mostly mangrove) are cut down once and again anonymously. As we know, trees resist soil erosion. So gradually, due to lack of trees, many lands of this forest are gone undersea.

Besides, almost every year Sundarban is the prime savior of the local people from the terrible natural disaster. Mangroves contribute to reducing the loss of life and damage to property from storms and cyclones as they reduce the impacts of waves, storm surges, and high winds. During relatively large storm surges, the leaves and branches of the forest canopy help to reduce wave energy providing the trees are tall enough. Mangroves are extensively able to reduce storm surge water depths as the surge flows inland. The dense mangrove forest canopies also reduce wind speeds locally.

For example, Due to the Sundarban's interruption, losses and damages by cyclone Bulbul have largely been reduced, as weather experts and forest men say. This cyclone hits the coastal regions adjacent to 24 Pargana of the West Bengal with the wind forces between 115 and 125 kilometers per hour. However, the wind speed of this cyclone was around 93 km per hour whenever it reaches to the Bangladeshi coastal belts. When cyclone Bulbul arrived at Khulna, it was much weaker. This is because of the mighty Sundarbans that decreased its violent wind speed (Roy, 2019).

### 5.3 Some consequences:

The natural watchman is not sufficient all the time. It fails quite often to give protection to its people. Though, the mangroves are not responsible alone. But the protections provides by it, is not at all ignorable and proven by the above mention facts. Whatever, after giving this kind of protection, a large part of the adjacent areas of Sundarban faced some horrible natural disaster almost every year, e.g. Tsunami, Ayla, Bulbul, Amphan etc. The people of these places lose their countless amounts of properties. The basic needs like food, shelter etc were come under huge crisis in this kind of natural disasters.

On the other hand, due to cutting down trees recklessly, many species of plants is going to abolish from that place which not only impact upon the balance of the bio-diversity, but also responsible for reduction of the oxygen production and increasing soil erosion.

## VI. Importance of Coastal Bengal to the Government

Coastal regions provide a great benefit in terms of geographical position, scope to enrich tourism and economy in multiple ways of the particular state. In other words, the fiscal of the state will be enrich if the areas are planned and developed properly and systematically.

### 6.1 Trade, Business and Internal Security:

Having a coast in any part is great advantage for the business and trading, transport and security of the state, specially the state like West Bengal which has international borders. As we know, the international borders of West Bengal are one of the sensitive and various types of illicit activities are often reported from these areas. Geographically, these areas have a great significance to the state and central government. So, it is essential to appoint the coastal guards and other security personnel as required to maintain strictly the international waters, for restricting terror activities in the state as well as in other parts of the nation, trespassing, different kinds of contraband which generally occurred in coastal parts and some other illegal activities.

Government also uses the ports and docks of their state for the business and trading purposes. Goods and products from various states or others countries are often unloading in the ports. Government receives and systematically transport to those areas where these products can be stored and will marketable. There are many people are appointed here to work in different sectors, are solely depend upon that works i.e. influenced by coastal trading. Seas are also a convenient mode of transportation for the traders as well as the common people.

### 6.2 Tourism:

Tourism is another important source to enrich the economy of a state. Tourism of any state can be advertised based on ecology, architecture and monuments, historical places, pilgrimage and so on. Among those, sea is one of the main attractions of tourists. The sea beaches of West Bengal are found mainly in the district of West Midnapore and North 24 Parganas. Places like Digha, Bakkhali, Tajpur, Mandarmani are popular among the sea beaches of West Bengal. Every year thousands of tourists come to enjoy the places. Now-a-days government invests more for further development in different aspects of these sea beaches. Besides, some new areas are also renovating as new beaches for the tourists.

On the other hand, there are lots of local people who are engaged in different occupations (rickshaw pullers and auto drivers, restaurant's and hotel's owners and their workers, resort's and holiday home's owners and their workers, bus drivers, travel agents, different kinds of shops and so on) in these tourist spots to sustain their lives.

## VII. Cultural Importance of Coastal Bengal

Coastal Bengal has a cultural importance too. The livelihood of coastal people of Bengal are greatly associated and influenced by the climate, weather and the Bay of Bengal. The people of these areas carry some cultural traits which are distinct and unique from the other parts of West Bengal.

As we know, ecology has an influence on the culture of any places. The scenario is not different here too. If we travel the coastal places, lots of things will be found which are associated with the coastal life. For example, boat is one of the main cultural phenomena in coastal areas. There are various types of boat will be found which are different in shape and size and also used for various purposes. Bengal has witnessed the evolution of boats from generations. Recently, some organizations are interested to showcase those knowledge and evolution. So, now-a-days boat museum is found in this state.

From the above paragraph, it is quite clear that many people of these areas are engaged with those occupations (fishing, pisciculture etc) which are directly associated with the water bodies (sea, ponds, rivers etc) and now-a-days, those occupations became traditionally maintained by many families. Besides, one of the most interesting thing is there are some deity(s) are found (mainly in Sundarban areas) which are generally not found in other parts of West Bengal. For example, 'Bonobibi'.

Whereas, it is quite obvious that in the tourist's spots like the coastal parts of West Bengal; many tourists come irrespective of season. So, due to this kind of gathering in those places, the chances of assimilation of cultural traits are greatly increased and in some places it has happened.

Another most important thing is the Ganga Sagar Mela is found in a specific region of coastal part of West Bengal i.e., Sagardwip. It is almost 124 kms from Kolkata and located in South 24 Pargana. It is one of the biggest fair in India. This fair is held every year in the season of winter. People came from distant places and celebrated with great enthusiasm and vigours. This festival has a great spiritual and cultural significance to the Hindu pilgrims who come here and dip themselves in the water (Ganga/Sagar)<sup>1</sup> to purify their souls. They also chant different 'mantra(s)' during the holy bath and other associated activities.

## VIII. Conclusive Observations

In this study, it is found that coastal regions of West Bengal have a deep impact on various sectors. The coastal regions work as natural savior from the disasters. Numerous lives, properties etc survive due to the shielding effect of these areas specially the Sundarban. Till now, these areas are quite able to maintain their bio-diversity. Government has a great interest of these areas due various factors like geographical position, tourism, economic enrichment and so on. Besides, some of these areas have cultural value too. Many people of different areas including local individuals are so vigorous and enthusiastic about all those values.

But now-a-days degradation of different aspects these regions have already started. We all should thankful to the nature for giving us this kind of beautiful gift. These areas should be maintained systematically along with the enjoyment. Government should think more and take necessary actions regarding any kind of atrophy of the coastal regions as well as the inhabitants. Otherwise, in near future we may lose one of the spectacular gifts of nature which benefitted us from multiple ways.

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<sup>1</sup> People use both the terms to identify the water body.

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