

Original article

RIVER AND SOCIETY: A STUDY ON AN UNORGANIZED SECTOR

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ABSTRACT

People use river for several purposes in the sense for trading, fishing, irrigation for agriculture, transportation and so on. Apart from these, resources of the rivers viz. boulder, stone and sand are also carried out with the flow of the river water from the top hills; and now-a-days, depending on these resources many of the people maintain their livelihood. In this regard, some people came at the Balasan River basin adjacent to Siliguri town in Darjeeling district, West Bengal around 25 years ago for maintaining their livelihood depending on the resources. The river Balasan comes down from Himalayas with natural resources like sand, stones and boulders, which are supplied to the adjacent areas, districts and often states that indicate the way of living of the concerned people. However, depending upon the river they started to live in a settled village on the said river basin. Hence, from the present view point, a study has been done on the formation of stone crushing community and the contribution of the river to the concerned people for survival. Therefore, the present study mainly highlights the people and their dependence upon the resources of the river for livelihood.

Keywords : Balasan river, Stone crushing, Siliguri, Unorganized sector

INTRODUCTION

Historically most of the civilizations were developed beside the bank of the rivers. In the context of survival, rivers are used for maintaining the livelihood in many respects like

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trading, fishing, irrigation, transportation and other purposes. The undeniable fact is that, rivers had provided water for farming crops which became a catalyst for each civilization. The development of agriculture helped people to settle in villages and create communities. When they had enough crops in storage, some of the people developed specialized trades or crafts. This formed an economy since the goods could be traded. This led to the civilizations (<http://library.thinkquest.org/3950/>). The major rivers are known to play a vital role in the development of early civilizations due to the fact that they helped to fertile the soil, which made it easier to grow crops. And this made farming more and more common to all civilizations. In order to keep the water under control they created an irrigation system to regulate the movement of the water so that it was evenly distributed among the civilizations and it became a part of the agriculture regions. In order to help the irrigation system someone was needed to control the distribution, which formed governments and specializations. Sometimes floods damaged the crops at certain areas. Workers often built walls and buildings to keep it under control (<http://wiki.answers.com>). Irrigation seems to be important in many of the areas where early state societies were developed. Irrigation made the land habitable or productive in parts of Meso-America, Southern Iraq, the Nile Valley, China, and South America (Ember *et al.*, 2002: 186). With rivers in place, development of civilization was possible because it provided the people several important factors: Rivers provided water to them that would let humans and plants survive. Thus, farming communities thrived because of water. Rivers provided people important trading routes. In turn it would help to develop cities along the shoreline. Rivers helped people to communicate and travel to other inlands and coastal communities that provide shelter, transport, and food which let the economy of the area thrive. Rivers also guided people to develop the vast land into cities. That's how important rivers were, and still are, in today's society (<http://answers.yahoo.com>). Therefore, the importance of rivers in the development of civilization deserves a special attention for their great contribution. In this connection, different kinds of resources like boulder, stone and sand are carried out with the water flow of the river from the top hills which have a great contribution to form a community known as 'stone crushing community' by providing the source of earning. The settlement was started around 25 years ago at Balasan River basin adjacent to Siliguri town in Darjeeling district, West Bengal. Considering the importance of all the facts the present study has been done on the aforesaid stone crushing community

especially in order to know the contribution of the river in the development of such community.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: To conduct the present study the village namely Purba Rangia located at Balasan River basin was selected where the stone based occupation was the backbone of economy. The data were collected both from primary and secondary sources in order to fulfil the needs of present research work. The secondary data were collected from several books, journals, internet etc. while both the quantitative and qualitative primary data were collected from the field through intensive field work with the help of several anthropological tools, techniques and methods like observation, census schedule, interview, key informant interview, case study etc. The quantitative data have been calculated with the help of simple statistical methods and keeping objectives in mind, and finally the data have been analyzed in detail to fulfil the needs of present study.

Area and People: The studied village, Purba Rangia was established at the bank of the river Balasan around 25 years ago near Siliguri town of Darjeeling district, West Bengal. All the studied people of this village belonged to Rajbanshi community, a chief schedule caste of North Bengal. The studied all the people were migrated and mostly came from Bangladesh owing to some unavoidable circumstances. Their earning was fully dependent on the availability of resources viz. boulder, stone and sand of the said river and due to this fact the stone based economy became the prime source of earning to the concerned people and thus they were termed as ‘stone crushing community’. The study was conducted on 250 stone crushing families having 1238 people of which males were 633(51.13%) and females were 605(48.87%); and the sex ratio was 956. They were basically homeless, resourceless as well as landless people. After migration, they accepted stone based occupation readily as their only way of living. The river Balasan provided them the primary needs for maintaining livelihood such as land, economy, food, cloth, shelter and so on which led to the development of such community at the said river basin.

Economy

The single, decisive factor that made it possible for them to settle permanent community was stone based occupation. Such type of occupation was developed on the basis of accessibility

of resources like boulder, stone and sand in Balasan River. The river Balasan comes down from Himalayas along with these resources which are supplied for urban construction to the adjacent areas. Thus the river has played an important role in the development of the said community as it provides them a gainful economic opportunity. The considerable fact was that only the manual labour was required to do such type of work and there was no age and gender biasness in this economic sector.

Case Study: Sadhan Barman was a 45 year's old man and he belonged to Rajbanshi community. He was born in Bangladesh. Earlier he was a cultivator and his earning was too little to run a family. He migrated from Bangladesh about eight years ago i.e. in 2003 due to some unavoidable circumstances. After migration both husband and wife got involved in stone based occupation and earned Rs. 2800/- per month. In his family he had his mother, wife and two daughters aged 11 and 9 years respectively. He stated that in earlier, before migration, he was passing through a tough condition and it was simply beyond his capacity to bestow minimum necessary requirements for livelihood just like after meat comes mustard, but after getting involved in stone based occupation he could able to come out from earlier constraints in many respects. He admitted that if he did not come here then he could never get rid of poverty in spite of continuous untiring effort. Thus for him it was fortune favours the brave. So far reported from him about their daily working schedule, it was like this: he woke up very early in the morning with the ray of sunup and soon after morning fresh and breakfast he went to the stone field along with lunch. Usually he returned home in the evening when the work was over for the day.

Basically the studied people were engaged in various stone based activities viz. stone collection and crushing, sand gathering and truck loading. They worked under *sardars* (headman) and they were paid once in a week by the *sardars* especially on Tuesday and the payment was totally dependent on the unit of work. This work was done in all climatic condition and the concerned people went to the river bed early in the morning and did their work for the whole day. The noticeable matter is that those people who were involved in truck loading were also paid weekly by the *sardars* and in this regard it is to be mentioned that the people who were involved in truck loading could load three trucks per day but rarely more than that and they worked in a group of three to four members. Each of them could earn

Rs. 20/- to Rs. 25/- for loading each truck. The data regarding their actual financial situation reveal that around 90 per cent families could earn up to Rs. 3000/- per month while rest of the families had more than that. Seemingly, it may be assumed they were supposed to be paid very little but not they felt so. Indeed, river helped them in many respects for their living besides job employment.

Food

Food is one of the basic needs for the survival of human beings. It is the key to the development of any society. In prehistoric period people needed to move for the sake of food. But gradually they began to produce crops and started to live in a permanent place. Thus, people no longer looked for their favourite food sources like hunting and gathering. They gradually developed the techniques for crop production and began to learn how to control the movement of water for irrigation that helped to increase crop production. In this way, when they had sufficient crops in storage, few of them developed specific trades resulting in a formation of economy which was developed since goods could be traded. Thus, the development of agriculture helped people to settle in villages and create communities. Therefore, it can be said that the key factor in the development of communities are nothing but searching for food. They found stone crushing occupation as the prime way to survive in the sense they got involved in such economic sector for the sake of mere subsistence.

Case Study: Bhakta Barman was a 37 year's old man and he belonged to Rajbanshi community. He was born in Bangladesh. Earlier he was an agricultural labour. He migrated from Bangladesh nearly seven years ago i.e. in 2004 due to utter financial constraints. After migration he got involved in stone based occupation for eking out of living. In his family he had his wife and a child aged 12 years. He told that in earlier it was simply impossible for him to accumulate food for twice a day for the family members. Even, often they had to starve for a whole day and the memory brought tears to his eyes. But after migration he was satisfied with this job as their average monthly income was Rs. 2600/-, which provided them a minimum security to accumulate food twice or thrice a day. He stated about his daily working schedule as- he woke up very early in the morning with the ray of sunrise and soon after morning fresh and taking breakfast with tea and bread or often rice he went to the stone field along with lunch. After returning home they made brisk preparation for dinner but mostly the same menu was repeated in the dinner.

Generally food habit depends on locally available natural resources and tradition of the community. In their daily diet, they mainly took rice with pulses and vegetables. In earlier their little earning was a severe constraint for them to purchase least expensive animal protein from the market but after migration they could able to accumulate the same at least twice in a month that helped to remind a proverb 'something is better than nothing'. The data reveal that 92 per cent and 42 per cent of the studied families could rarely accumulate the meat and fishes respectively while it was either once in a week or in a month for rest of the families. Moreover, some of them could provide the milk and other health drinks to their children. Thus, it was clear that they could able to have a sigh of relief as it was not possible in earlier.

Shelter

Shelter is the basic human requirement which provides both protections for living and bodily comfort to the people. After the invention of agriculture the people needed a shelter to settle permanently in a village, so immediately they built house around the working field. They gradually developed new techniques to build their houses. Therefore, it was another decisive factor in the development of villages. In the discussion of formation of stone crushing community, the shelter deserves a special focus for its valuable contribution. After migration one of the prime needs was shelter because they were resource-less, landless as well as shelter-less people. But indeed they seem to have not met any big problem for this essential requirement because the river provided them land free of cost to settle permanently. Moreover, they were able to build their houses on this land and in many cases they used the sand, stone etc. to build the same. They were mostly found to live in the *kachha* houses made of wattle walls and corrugated tin roofs. In this regard the data reveals that around 84 per cent of total studied families were found to live in such type of houses while the rest were comparatively in better state as they had been living there since beginning of formation. Thus, the security for shelter ensured them for permanent settlement at the said river basin.

Education

Education is another most important part in our life like other basic needs, food, cloth and shelter. Indeed, education seems to tell men, how to think, how to work properly and how to

make decision. It is the key to economic development and helps people to earn more and live well.

Case Study: Prafulla Barman was a 14 year's old boy and he belonged to Rajbanshi community. He was born in Bangladesh. They migrated here nearly 10 years ago i.e. in 2001. After migration stone based occupation was their prime source of income but both his parents could not run their family well with little earning. Therefore, he got involved in the stone based job in order to contribute to the family income. He was reading in class IV. Both his parents always tried to keep him in touch of school education. He was first generation learner. His father confessed that he failed to come in the light of education due to serious economic setback but he had a strong will to make his children educated but due to poverty he could not ensure his children to continue their education. His eyes filled with tears while telling the fact that who will undo what is ordained by fate. However, he extended a little bit of sympathy to his family that his children are not as illiterate as him. It is postulated that every parents love their child whether they are literate or illiterate.

The data reveal that around 42 per cent females and 58 per cent males were literate though the literacy rate of the parents were very poor as more than 75 per cent fathers and 83 per cent mothers were illiterate. Whereas in the present generation, around 88 per cent children belonging to the age group 7-14 years were literate; and among them around 64 per cent were the school going students. It is true that always the parents could not provide all the educational infrastructures including tuition, books, dress etc. to them. But it is true that now a major percentage of children were able to come in the light of education where as it was not possible for their parents. However, the educational profile in the studied area reveals a better condition in perspective of literacy rate in the present generation.

Indeed, the river Balasan not only provided them the basic requirements for living like employment opportunity, food and shelter but the educational opportunity as well. Most of the children of the present generation have come in the light of education but it was not seen in earlier. Though the unfortunate reality was that they could not able to enjoy all the required educational facilities but they were little bit satisfied with what they got. In fact the educational outcome is one of the key areas which are influenced by family income.

GENERAL OBSERVATION AND REMARKS

The forgoing discussion has made it clear that the single decisive factor in the development of civilization was an undeniable contribution of river. People used the river for various purposes in order to fulfil their needs for living which resulted in formation of settled village life. But in the studied area it was a matter of great concern that how the people started to live permanently depending on a new kind of resources. All the families in the said area were migrants, who were forced to come here for subsistence as they had not enough money. Indeed, this landless, resource-less as well as helpless people gathered together at the said river basin with the hope of getting a minimum security for living. The River had never disappointed their hopes what they expected rather ensured them a safety and security. There is no doubt that no one can live in a society without minimum basic necessities of life but for them in such a place there exists all and even more than what is needed in order to satisfy the basic necessities of life. In fact the river provided them more than what they expected. It is true that it was not enough at all for living what they earned. But we cannot simply ignore the fact that once these people were in a serious crisis and worried about their jobs and livelihood. After all, they could get an assurance to save their life due to the great contribution of the River. The river Balasan ensured most of the essential needs for living including employment opportunity and along with the social security too. Though it may be at minimum level but they got a security for living. They began to live in a new way with a new identity. Therefore, this newly evolved stone based economy undoubtedly brought a turning point in the struggle for survival and it seems to be created a new horizon to survive. Findings from this study show that, river and stone based economy provided the requirements to maintain their livelihood. But they face several constraints to maintain their livelihood due to their poor earning and some other difficulties. Therefore, some special recommendations for the betterment of their life are given below–

- They need to improve their family income and ensure their economic security.
- They have to be provided the security for basic needs like food, cloth and shelter.
- They should be provided educational opportunity with its proper infrastructure.
- The people should be ensured to provide fundamental rights.

- Some developmental policies especially for making village roads, house, sanitation, and electrification as well should be taken and implemented.
- Much effort should be put into setting up wells and tube-wells in the village.

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