

Life at the Ghats: An Anthropological Study on the Boatman of Banaras

Subhandu Patra

Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi

Abstract: *The present paper is an attempt to study the socio-economic condition of the boatman community in Banaras from an anthropological approach. The city of Banaras now developed as a major pilgrimage centre of Hindus and a key destination for foreign backpackers to search for the true soul of Indian culture. However, Banaras is incomplete without focusing the role of boatman and their cultural context. Boatman of Banaras plays an important role in introducing the city to its visitors. Although, traditionally the boatman community belongs to 'Mallah' caste group, but this features is now diminishing, as different caste groups entering into this profession day by day. In this perspective, this paper ethnographically describes the social structure, material culture and other aspects of boatman community. The major source of data for this paper has come from the fieldwork in Banaras and other sources like academic journals, research articles etc. The paper is divided into various sections and each section is focusing on different issues. The study concludes that despite their significant role in continuing the charm of Banaras, their livelihood is in poor state and need special care from government.*

Keywords: *Anthropological, Banaras, Boatman, Livelihood, Social structure,*

I. Introduction

Banaras is recognized as an auspicious Hindu pilgrimage centre not only in India, but also in the world. The city is situated on the banks of the holy river Ganges with nearly eighty 'ghats' (staircase made by concrete) in its riverfront. Banaras is originally developed as a sacred complex with all its temples, shrines and the sacred river 'Ma Ganga', Banaras today place as an important domestic and international tourist's destination with pilgrimages coming from around the world. Peoples from almost every corner of India have visited the city to see the Lord 'Shiva' and a bathe in the river Ganga to remove all their trespass. According to Hindu myth, a death in Banaras has leaded a man to the way to heaven. The colourful *ghats* and its stone, the narrow lane and its wall, the architectures of the temples depict the history and cultures of Banaras which remain unchanged since the civilization has begun.

In this scenario, the boatman of Banaras plays an important role to various types of visitors of the city. The Boatman act as 'cultural brokers' by introducing the city of Banaras to its visitors; tourists and pilgrimages has carefully snoopd the narrate story by boatman and fit them within the history of Banaras. Thus a ride in boat on the Ganges is essential for the visitors to take the essence of Banaras. The boatman's are traditionally belongs to the Mallah or Nishad caste, although a number of boatmen are also coming from out of these two castes (Doron 2009). The boatman traces their origin from the story of the boatman Khevat in Ramayana, where Khevat ferries lord Rama, Sita and Lakshmana across the river Gangas. For their livelihood the boatmen of Banaras have been extensively depending on tourists, as scope for others work is inadequate for them. Most of the boatman plies their boat between Raj *ghat* to Assi *ghat*, as majority of the tourists want to see only those *ghats*. The present paper thus intends to explore the social-cultural life of the boatman community in Banaras.

II. Earlier Works On Banaras

A wide-ranging literature on Banaras had been done by various scholars from different subject background; this includes from the socio-economic life of its inhabitants to religious and cultural core of Banaras. One of the earliest anthropological works on Banaras was done by Vidyarthi et al. (1979). Their classic ethnography "The sacred complex of Kashi: a microcosm of Indian civilization", depicted the sacred complex of Kashi in which Vidyarthi adopted his famous theory "sacred complex"(Vidyarthi 1961). Indeed the work by Diana Elk (1983) was considered as an archetypal text on Banaras. Her books "Banaras: City of Lights" revealed the inner spirit of socio-religious life of Banaras. In "Toward an Anthropology of Senility: Anger, Weakness, and Alzheimer's in Banaras, India", the author Lawrence Cohen (1995) introduced us to a different scenario of Banaras that is the narratives of Alzheimer affected peoples. Asa Doron was another pioneering anthropologist who has done an extensive fieldwork in Banaras and published some excellent articles on various aspects of Banaras. In Doron's (2004) 'Tourist-Host Transactions: The Boatmen of Varanasi as Cultural Brokers', the everyday life of boatman community, their interaction with tourist and the ritual economy of

Banaras. Kelly D. Alley (1994) in her paper 'Ganga and Gandagi: Interpretations of Pollution and Waste in Banaras' focused on a very important and contemporary issue of Banaras. She discussed the issue of pollution of the city and its impact on the river Ganga and also looked on the resident views about pollution. A number of studies have also been done by different scholars on the weavers of Banaras (Sharma 2001; Bose 2007; Ahmad 2007). Their studies mainly resolved around the problems of chronic poverty among weavers, present crisis and impact of globalization on local silk weavers of Banaras. Last but not the list is Nita Kumar's (1992) fascinating work 'Friends, brothers, and informants: fieldwork memoirs of Banaras' in which she brilliantly narrate her fieldwork experience in Banaras.

III. Objectives

The present paper has some prime objectives. These are as follows

1. To study the social structure of the boatman community in Banaras.
2. To study the ritual essence of the boatman community in Banaras
3. To explore socio-economic life of the boatman community in Banaras, especially their engagement with tourists.
4. To explore the problems faced by boatman community in present days.

IV. Methodology

To understand the life and cultures of boatman communities, an ethnographic fieldwork has been carried out in Banaras during the period of 2012-13 for thirty days. A purposive sampling technique has used for selecting key informants among the boatmen. The methodology includes taking field notes on activities of the boatman in *ghats* area, their conversion with pilgrimages and tourists. Beside this, several interviews, case studies and group discussion among the boatman were carried out.

V. Social Structure

From my conversation with Sital Majhi, I came to know that most of the boatman of Banaras maintains the job of boat plying generation wise. According to them the boatman who had his own boat, he would known as "Majhi" and the driver of the boat was known as "Sahani" in their community. The Boatman of Banaras are divided into seven caste group namely i) Majhi, ii) Molla, iv) Manjaware, v) Kerot, vi) Nisad, vii) Bind, viii) Gor.

'Majhi' community is the owners of boat. Now they are termed themselves as 'Sahani'. 'Molla' community is the driver of the boat. On inquire about the ownership of the boat, Bablu Sahani who is himself a boat owner in Babua Pande *ghat* told me that, "each of the *ghats* of Banaras had 2-3 boat owners and boatmen were working under them on a basis of an indenture that the boatmen had to pay half of their earnings from per boat ride to the owner of the boat." Bablu also informed me that most of the boat plies from renowned *ghats* like, Harischandra *ghat*, Kedar *ghat*, Dasaswamedh *ghat*, Manikarnika *ghat*, Dr. Rajendra Prasad *ghat* etc. At each *ghat*, there were specific numbers of boats. These boats were divided into their respective owners. There are two renowned authority of boatman who mainly deals with their problem, namely- i) Ma Ganges Nisad Raja Samiti and ii) Gangotri Seba Samiti. The head of Ma Ganges Nisad Samiti is Binod Kumar Sahani, the secretary is Prithibi Majhi and the assistant secretary is Promod Majhi.

VI. Types Of Boat And Its Manufacture

House Boat or Bazra: This type of boat was look like a house and it has "*khirkies*" (windows) and "*darbaja*"(door) as it were present in any type of house. This is also a hand pull boat and almost 80 feet long. The wall, window, and doors were also made by woods. The interior of the boat had two sides seats and it could tolerate around 70-80 people. The bazra is mainly more available at the time of "*Holi*". To celebrate this auspicious occasion, tourist and pilgrims were liked to hire it.

Ghatar: - This was big sized hand pull boat; this was approximately 50 feet long and it could carry roughly 50 people. These types of boats were usually like by the pilgrim's, who were come in groups.

Dingi:- This was the middle sized boat, also made by wood. Almost 40 feet long and it could bear 30-40 people. Dingis are also hired by the group of pilgrims and tourists.

Katar :- This was the small sized hand pull boat and around 15 people were by far sat on this boat. The boats were made by "sakur" wood as this wood did not ruin by water. They purchase this wood from the kalrimandi bazaar in front of the Chouki *ghat*. The cost of the wood is Rs. 1500-2000/ feet. They piece the wood according to the length of the boat. Then each piece was stuck together by the helps of nails. These pieces of wood were locally known as *patri*. To make a *katar* there were 25 *patries* were needed to make the *jamin* (base)

of the boat and 12-13 *patries* were required to make the walls of the boat. The passengers were used to sit was known as *pat*. The *darh* of the boat was made up of bamboo stick and two *darh* were required to play a boat. The total manufacturing cost of the ghatar or the big sized boats were Rs- 2-2.5 lakhs, *dingi* or middle size boats were Rs-50-60 thousand and *katar* or small sized boats were Rs 20-25 thousand. For making of the boats, labours were come from the chunar, some locals are also engage with this occupation (i.e. making boat). The labours were charged Rs.150/- per day with the facility of providing breakfast and launch. It takes almost one month to finish the boat. After finishing the boat, it was coated by a certain type of paint which was the mixture of black paint, tar and smeared cow dung. Tar was used for making the woods hard and to protect them from water. Then the boat was put under the sunlight for five days to dry out the boat.

VII. Associated Rituals With Boating

The boatman of Banaras is practising some rituals which were related to their occupation. Bishnu Nishad, a key informant of mine told me that they believed in “Sitala ma”, “Ganga Ma”, “Hanuman ji” and “Kebatraj”. Among this “Nao *Puja*” is very much famous in Varanasi. During “Nao *Puja*” the surface they seat is cleaned by the Ganges water to purify the seat. The *pandas* also recite the prescribed mystic words. They also purified themselves to take Ganges water in their hand. They touched their right hand five times in the initial part of the boat. After that they gave flowers and flower rings to the rope of the boat. They also took scarified thing such as “*Ate ki puri, Gajar ka halua, chawal* etc.” in the part of the boat where worship is conducted and into the rope also. Then the all people gather into the boat and boat start to reach to the opposite side of the Ganges. In the opposite side of the Ganges they made statue of lord Shiva by sand and they worship the statue. There after they back to the main *ghat* where they start the worship. And at last they went to “Shitala” temple and worship the goddess “Shitala”. According to some boatman they also worshiped the “Kebatraj” on that day. They believed that “Kebatraj” was the god of boat. Because it was belief that “kebatraj” helps lord Rama to across the river in his boat for the first time. He was famous as “Nao Devta” among the Boatman.

During the conversation with the other boatman I came to know that they also worshiped the river Ganga, which they considered as “Ganga Mai”. When they used their new boat for first time they worshiped “Ganga ma”.

VIII. Engaging With Tourists

The main sources of boatman economy has come from both Indian and foreign tourists. In my conversation with Bablu Sahani in Babua Pande *ghat*, he points out different things which determine a boatman’s capability to income. The first and foremost need is a boatman must have to convince a tourist for a boat ride. Bablu told me that the rate is varying according to tourist; that is whether is local or international. The popular boat riding route is from Harischandra ghat to Manikarnika ghat for which a boatman charged Rs-150/hr for four people and it rose up to Rs.-500/hr in case of foreigners. The rates were also different for watching ‘Ganga Aaroti’ at the evening. The social structure of boatman community indeed also reflect in their economic income, as the owner of boat took fifty percent of the days income and rest goes to the drivers of boat. Thus who don’t have any boat would also employ themselves in different types of economy like my informants Bablu work as “Dhobi” in his free time. He also informed that others are also doing some kinds of alternative jobs side by side in order to sustain their livelihoods. I have seen many boatmen’s work as local guide for domestic tourists, especial travellers from south India.

IX. Conclusion

The paper makes an attempt to study the current scenario of the boatman community in Banaras and in doing so, the study concludes on various aspects. First, it is evident that, there a structural change is emerging rapidly in the social structure within the community. Boatman is now no longer a profession of only to those who are belong to ‘Mallha’ caste group; others are also coming into this profession. Secondly, the entire boatman community is facing the problem of economic crisis in their livelihood, in spite of the fact that tourism is increasing in Banaras. Most of the boatman claim that during rainy season they were become jobless as the water in the river flooded the *ghat*, even to shock they are remain without any passengers in some of the days during peak season as well. It is not so wrong to say that lack of government intervention has enlarge the vulnerability of boatman community, absence of government measure on education or health make more difficult the life of children and women’s of boatman community. The study thus suggests that, a proper development scheme for improvements of socio-economic condition of the boatman community should be taken by the government. The study is of course not beyond its limitation. The fieldwork for this paper was not conducted on a large scale with relatively small informants. This was happened due to shorter times and unavailability of funds. Despite this inadequacy, the paper significantly addresses the main issues related with social, economic and livelihood of boatman community in details.

Acknowledgements

I would like to give my sincere thanks to boatmen of Banaras for providing me the opportunity to do my fieldwork in Banaras; especially much credit goes to Bablu Sahani who arranged all the things smoothly. I was also grateful to Professor Arnab Das, Dept, of Anthropology, Calcutta University for his guidance during and after the fieldwork. The support of others co-fieldworker is indeed duly acknowledges.

References

- [1]. Ahmad, Nesar (2007) Handloom Cluster: Globalization and the Indigenous Artisan Economy: A Case Study of the Varanasi Silk Sari Industry, Unpublished technical report of the *All India Artisans and Craftworkers Association*, New Delhi, India.
- [2]. Alley, Kelly D. (1994) Ganga and Gandagi: Interpretations of Pollution and Waste in Banaras. *Ethnology*, Vol. 33, No. 2, pp. 127-145. University of Pittsburgh, USA.
- [3]. Bose, Tarun Kanti. (2007) Globalization. Pushes Varanasi Weavers to Hunger and Death, *Asian Human Rights Commission*, Hong Kong.
- [4]. Cohen, Lawrence. (1995) Toward an Anthropology of Senility: Anger, Weakness, and Alzheimer's in Banaras, India. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, New Series, Vol. 9, No. 3, pp. 314-334, Blackwell Publishing on behalf of the American Anthropological Association, USA.
- [5]. Doron, Assa. (2005) Encountering the 'Other': Pilgrims, Tourists and Boatmen in the City of Varanasi. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 16(2): 157-178
- [6]. Doron, A 2009, Ferrying the Gods: Myth, performance and the Question of 'Invented Traditions' in the City of Banaras, *Sites*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 58-79
- [7]. Eck, Diana L. (1983) *Banaras: City of Light*. Princeton University Press, New Jersey, USA.
- [8]. Kumar, Nita. (1992) *Friends, Brothers, and Informants: Fieldwork Memoirs of Banaras*. The Regents, University of California, Berkeley, USA.
- [9]. Sharma Ranjan. (2001) *The Doomed Looms: A paper on Banaras Handloom Industry*. Sri Satya Sai University School of Business Management Accounting and Finance, A.P, India.
- [10]. Vidyarthi, L.P. (1961) *The Sacred Complex in Hindu Gaya*, Concept Publishing Company, Delhi.
- [11]. Vidyarthi, L.P., Saraswati B. N. & Jha Makhan. (1979) *The Sacred Complex of Kashi: A Microcosm of Indian Civilization*, Concept Publishing Company, Delhi.