

Livelihood Along River Ghats: Significance Of Ghats In Kolkata And Howrah, West Bengal

Ms. Sayanti Pal & Dr. Samhita Chaudhuri

*M.Sc. Student, Department Of Geography, Bijoy Krishna Girls' College, Howrah,
Associate Professor, Department Of Geography, Bijoy Krishna Girls' College, Howrah, West Bengal.*

Abstract

In India, the river ghats are highly significant from social, cultural and economic point of view. Many beautiful and unique architecture can be seen along ghats of different rivers in all over India. Most of the people of this country believe that, these ghats are holy places, where sacred activities are performed. People use these ghats for religious rituals, ceremonies, cultural events, economy, transport and for social activities. Based on primary data, this paper revolves around those activities of people, which are depended on these river ghats of Hooghly River in two districts (Kolkata and Howrah) of West Bengal state. The study finds some important points relating to these ghats and people's livelihood patterns as well as recommends some ways to boost the financial condition of the local people depended on these ghats for their livelihood.

Keywords: *Ghats, Cultural, Rituals, Livelihoods, Activities*

Date of Submission: 01-05-2026

Date of Acceptance: 11-05-2026

I. Introduction

In India, the steps constructed to go down to the river are called the *Ghats*. These steps are used for different activities like bathing, worship, rituals, entertainment etc. The significance of ghats in India's cultural heritage is manifold. They are believed to have the power to help in making spiritual merit for every individual of this earth and make them feel closer to God. *Ghats* along the river Ganga act as places, where several daily activities are taking place besides their role as occasional meeting place as well as festive celebrations, worship and rituals. People gather on *ghats* of the river Ganga throughout the year to perform the rituals like bathing on specific days to achieve religious merit, floating miniature lightened boats and *diyas* to pray for beloved one, throwing ashes of loved ones and many more.

These *ghats* are places where people come together from different places and different purposes. They use these *ghats* for religious rituals, ceremonies, cultural events, economy, transport and for social activities. In other words, these *ghats* help people feel close to their community and region. In recent days, local government also trying to increase people's attraction to these *ghats* to boost the tourism industry, which will contribute to the local financial system and provide employment opportunities for the local people in various ways.

This paper revolves around those activities of people, which are depended on these river ghats of two districts of West Bengal state. These two districts share the Hooghly River on its both side and both enjoy the colonial legacy of British India. Many architectural marvels are still standing on both the sides of the river, which were constructed during the colonial period. Some architectures are standing with their glory having the close proximity of the river connected with the city through *ghats*. Based on primary survey, this study reveals that, many people are also connected with these *ghats* through their socio-cultural and economic activities. The study finds some important points relating to these ghats, which show how important these ghats are to local people and the study also recommends some ways to boost the financial condition of the local people depended on these *ghats* for their livelihood.

Objectives and Methodology

The major objectives of the study are-

1. To assess the socio-demographic information of the people, whose livelihoods are related with these *ghats*,
2. To understand the significance of the *ghats* in the livelihood pattern of local people of the study area.

The methodology used in this study is a mixed method, where both qualitative and quantitative data have been used to achieve the final outcomes of the study. Information based on primary survey has been analyzed along with some secondary sources of information.

II. Literature Review

The Bhagirathi-Hooghly Basin in India, that covers a large tract of southern part of the West Bengal state, is one of the most densely populated regions in the world. In recent decades, this region is undergoing rapid transformation of its natural landscape by human activities. Robert Ivermee (2021) mentioned that the River Hooghly, not only today, but since the ancient past played very important role within Bengal as well as in whole world. People from different parts of Europe and Asia came to this river for trade and commerce. Some came as missionaries to influence the living pattern of people reside along this river. This book also explains how different groups wanted to control the river over time including the Mughals, Portuguese, Dutch, French, and finally the British, who made their main city there, all tried to control the Hooghly River. Researchers also study how human activities has changed and modified the natural landscape along the river ghats of Kolkata and Howrah. The human activities including construction of buildings and other economic activities shape the surrounding landforms in a different way. The major anthropogenic signatures on land use and land cover changes along the Hooghly River basin has become research topics among contemporary researchers (Das, Ghose & Islam, 2020). The ghats of the river are excellent example of cultural landscape which have been developed through the various human activities in a long-time frame. Founded by the British East India Company and grew for over three centuries, the city of Kolkata is popular to the whole world for it's socio-cultural diversity. The age-old traditions of this region also help to create a specific identity for the whole city and its hinterland in a form of 'associative cultural landscape' (Bardhan & Paul, 2019). Exploring the livelihood patterns of local people, interactions with them, experiences of religious rituals and festive ceremonies, sounds of temple bells and religious songs performed by local unknown artists- all make the *ghats* more colourful throughout the year. The history, culture, religion, and nature of many ghats on the banks of the River Ganga may add more importance to the cultural life of people attached to different *ghats* (Mohanty, 2024).

The Study Region- Details Of Ghats

The present study is based on the Hooghly River *Ghats* of two districts, namely Kolkata and Howrah of the state of West Bengal in the Indian Union. Hooghly river is the south flowing course of the River Ganga, which bifurcates from the main channel after crossing the Rajmahal Hills in the Chotanagpur plateau and after entering the Malda district. As this is a part of the River Ganga, thus people of West Bengal treat this a sacred river and perform religious rituals just like the main course of River Ganga.

With a strong colonial past, the city of Kolkata (earlier Calcutta) and the other town, Howrah represent the intense account of history and architectural heritage. The architecture of the British era stands as creating an identity to both the places since colonial days till today. The important river *ghats*, where the study was conducted to identify the socio-cultural and economic dependencies of local people on these *ghats*. In this research, researchers concentrated on those people, who depend on these *ghats*, for their livelihoods. Following are the details of these *ghats* on both the sides of the River Hooghly-

Bagbazar Ghat of present-day Kolkata is situated in the northern part of the city with a latitudinal and longitudinal point of 22.5986° N, 88.3735° E and is famous for cultural and religious activities by local people and devotees from surrounding areas. This *ghat* is still used by local people for bathing, collecting holy water for ritual purposes and considered as a sacred place along the river Ganga (Hooghly). The *ghat* has a part dedicated to Maa Sarada and often called as '*Mayer Ghat*'. **The Shobhabazar ghat** was constructed for use of the Deb family and local people. Nabakrishna Deb started Durga Puja in 1757 at the Shobhabazar Rajbari located in the area of Shobhabazar. **Ahiritola ghat** connects the two sides of the river through a well-developed ferry service. This *ghat* is famous for the ferry service as it is one of the most important jetty in Kolkata. This *ghat* was built by Baboo Raj Chandra in the mid of Nineteenth Century. **Babu Ghat** is the second oldest *ghat* in Kolkata, which is also known as Rani Rashmani *Ghat*, to pay respect to the great Lady of Bengal. The other names of Babughat are - Babooghat, Baje Kadamtala *Ghat*, Baboo Raj Chandra *Ghat* etc., which is today, celebrating its 196 years of service to the socio-economic and cultural life of people of Kolkata. This *ghat* is popular with its tall unique architecture with beautiful Doric-Greek style pavilion with huge pillars. There is an excellent landing dock of the Babughat. **The Prinsep Ghat** resembles to a perfect combination of Greek and Gothic architectural elements, which is located on the banks of the River Hooghly, between the Water Gate and St. George's Gate of Fort William. This architecture was constructed in 1841 is considered as one of the outstanding symbols of colonial architecture in Kolkata. In earlier days, the Prinsep Ghat emerged as the important boarding point (mainly as a replacement of Chandpal Ghat) Royal visitors in Kolkata (former Calcutta). The **Dakhineswar Ghat** is a major religious site of Kolkata. It was in 1847, when Rani Rashmoni saw a dream to make a temple along the Hooghly River and organize for worship of Maa Kali. Since then, the Dakshineswar Ghat is standing as a representation of spiritual devotion and is famous for the historical, cultural and religious significance. Today, this *ghat* is popular for its *ghat* for bathing and other religious purposes, the temple complex with the Dakshineswar Kali Temple situated at the heart of this temple complex. **Howrah Ferry Ghat** started its ferry services on river Hooghly in 1975, under the Sunderban Launch Syndicate. The

ferry service started to make a quicker way to travel for commuters and also to reduce the load on the Howrah Bridge. However, in 1992, the Government of West Bengal started their own ferry service through West Bengal Surface Transport Corporation (WBSTC). Besides, two other important ferry service providers are- Ghatal Stream Navigation Private Limited (GSNPL) and Indo Swiss Trading Company Private Limited (ISTCPL). **Salkia Bandhaghat** is a heritage of Howrah district as it is linked with many prominent leaders of British India as Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar came here while traveling from Midnapore to Calcutta. The ghat was first built on 70 years ago and reconstructed in 1985. Many local shops and cotton wool godowns can be found along the road near the ghat, which leads to the wrought iron structure of the Bandhaghat's facade. **Sheoraphuli Nimai Tirtha Ghat** is about 500 years old. The name of this ghat is linked with Sri Chaitanya Deb, when he visited Hooghly district for the pilgrimage of Tarakeswar and bathed in river Ganga on the bathing ghat of Baidya Bati. After that, he started his journey to Tarakeswar on foot. After his visit, the ghat got the name of Nimai Tirtha Ghat. **Konnagar Baromandir ghat** is the area for local commerce (various shops), reflecting the economic activities of the surrounding community. Here local people come to enjoy different types of leisure activity.

Various Activities Of Ghats

In a country like India, which celebrates its cultural heritage and festivities with much joy and enthusiasm throughout the year, river water performed many activities representing the whole life span of a human being- from birth to death. In every ritual, river water is closely linked and influence the livelihood of the local people who live besides the water body. Establishment of a socio-cultural relationship between the people and the river is therefore a common character of every ritualistic performance in this country. Historically, rivers played important role, besides transporting people and goods, but more as bathing place as well as performing rituals and resulted as being the centre of urban development. However, the relationship between rivers and the people has changed over time in every corner of the country. Recently, the activities performed by river banks have changed dramatically with inclusion of several people and regional development policies. Various stages of changes also may be identified with the passage of time. Some important activities may be summarised as-

1. traditional practices,
2. mixed activity- traditional (e.g., offering puja) and contemporary (e.g., pre-wedding photoshoot),
3. construction activities (architecture like gate and temple structure),
4. beautification of the local *ghat* area,
5. incorporation of various tourism and related activities

III. Socio-Demographic Information Of The People Attached To These Ghats For Their Livelihood

The *ghats* along the Hooghly River in both the banks (i.e., in Kolkata and Howrah districts of West Bengal) are central point of activity- social, economic and cultural, thus offering a specific socio-economic livelihood pattern for the communities who work there. Celebrating their age-old tradition and historical significance, these *ghats* are not merely a transit points or religious sites for local people, but in a true sense, these *ghats* support different types of livelihoods for different people. These people share their daily joys, sorrows and challenges with these *ghats* as these places are offer many opportunities for their livelihood to these people.

Total 195 persons were surveyed, who are dependent on these ghats for their livelihoods. These are- Shopkeepers (Permanent Shops), Food Vendors, Priests, Boatmen, Barber, Rickshaw Pullers and Others (Tourist Guide, Photographer etc.). The study focuses on the socio-cultural and economic behaviour of the people, who depend on these ghats for their livelihoods. Some are shopkeepers, who have permanent shops at the *ghat*; some are food vendors, who have no permanent shop but come to *ghats* to sell their products regularly. Some people work as priest, who perform all ritual activities for various occasions; some people are boatmen, who work in ferry service sometimes at regular basis and sometimes to assist tourists; some people are barber, who perform ritual practices during various occasions in Hindu culture; some are rickshaw pullers, who help people to come to these *ghats*. A very recent profession is tourist guide, who assist tourists by telling the stories connected to these *ghats* and assist in heritage walks along these *ghats*. Another interesting is the photographer, who click photos for visitors, e.g., wedding photographers. Among food vendors, who have not any fixed shop at the *ghat* area, they sell variety of foods like- Chaat, Fuchka, Paprichat, Bhelpuri, Jhalmuri, Badam Bhaja, Kulfi, Ice-cream, Fruits, Chatur Sorbot, Sugarcane Juice, Fruit Juice. Hence, researchers concentrated on these people, who depend on these *ghats*, for their livelihoods.

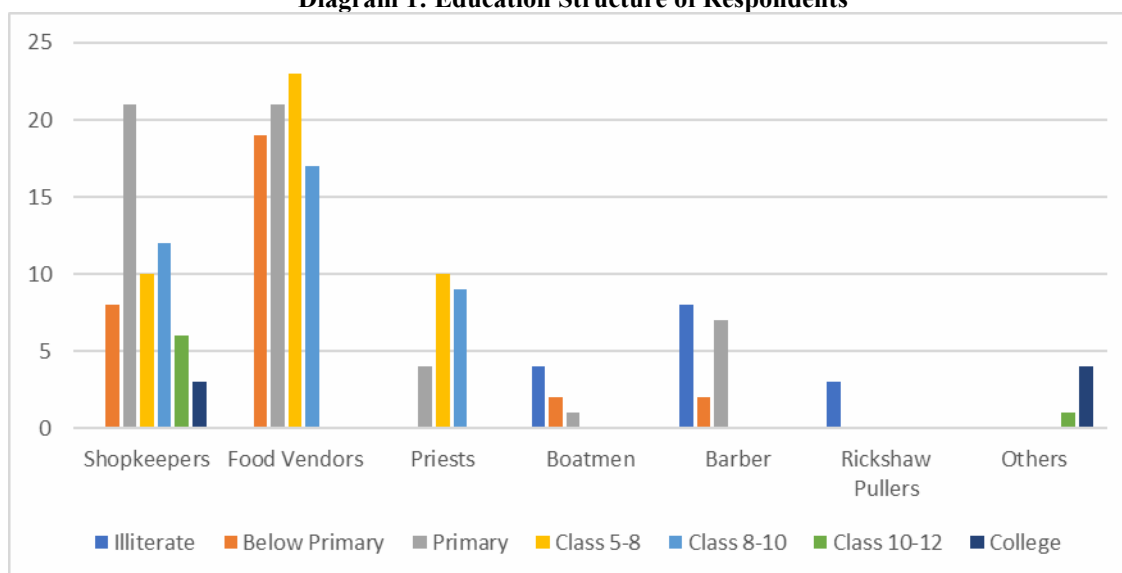
The demographic profile of these respondents are as follows-

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Age Groups	Shopkeepers (in %)	Food Vendors (in %)	Priests (in %)	Boatmen (in %)	Barber (in %)	Rickshaw Pullers (in %)	Others (in %)
25-34	22	15		29			
35-44	23	23		43		33	60
45-54	18	36	22	14	35	33	40
55-64	25	19	30	14	35	33	
65-74	12	8	39		30		
Above 75			9				
Total Respondents (115)	100 %	100 %	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Primary Survey (March-April, 2024)

Diagram 1: Education Structure of Respondents



Source: Primary Survey (March-April, 2024)

The demographic profile reveals that, the age groups varies from 25 to more than 75. Table 1 shows that, only priest are of above 75 age group, while tourist guide and photographers are mostly middle aged (with age groups 35-50). Young people (age group 25-34) lead in the profession of shopkeepers, food vendors and boatmen. However, majority people are in the group of 35-44. Education structure reveals that, most of the economic group people completed their primary education and started their profession to support their families (Diagram 1).

The surveyed data clearly indicates specific demographic character like- the shopkeeping profession that is mainly male dominated. The highest participation for males is in the 55-64 age group (67 percent vendors), while for females, the highest participation (82 percent) is seen in the age group of 33-44. Majority (67 percent) are married and helping their husbands in running the shop. Some female shopkeepers are also accompanying their father while very few females have started their own shop. Most of the shopkeepers have a nuclear family but the traditional joint families are also can found. Generation-wise shops are also there, where younger generation took the responsibility of the earlier generation. Majority of the shops located in these *ghats* are running their business for almost over 20 years. Due to increase in visitors and pilgrims, new shops are also opening in every ghat. In all these ghats, about 29 percent shops are newly established out of total surveyed 90 shops.

The occupational structure of shopkeepers reveal the fact that, majority of them earn Rs.11,000/- to Rs.20,000/- per month. On the other hand, boatmen, barber, priest and rickshaw pullers earn very less ranging from Rs.1000/- to Rs.15000/- per month. For temporary shop owners, like food vendors, income is not same like permanent shop owners. Most of the vendors earn Rs.1200/- to Rs.5000/- rupees per month. This picture shows a huge disparity in the income level among the different communities.



Photo 1 Food Vendor



Photo 2 Barber



Photo 3: Priests in a temple at Ahiritola Ghat



Photo 4: Ferry service at Bagbazar ghat

IV. Significance Of The Ghats In The Livelihood Pattern Of Local People

- The study reveals that, different types of activities are constantly going on these ghats. Some specific types of activities (like ritual and recreational) have been concentrated in some ghats (like Shobabazar ghat and Babughat), while, there are ghats like Howrah, where ferry activity is predominated than any other activity.

The Dakhineswar ghat, Sheoraphuli Nimai Tirtha ghat are mainly popular among the pilgrimages during specific festival days and able to attract many visitors and worshippers in all around the year.

- Though in every *ghat*, economic activities are predominated, where one can observe many shops and food vendors. In some ghats like in the Bagbazar ghat and Shobabazar ghat, due to the funeral related activities, barbers have been found.
- Among the food vendors, the number of fast-food sellers is high. As the reason for this, they basically said the demand for this type of food is quite high in respect to other food items. Out of 80 food vendors surveyed, about 58 percent sell fast foods. In Howrah ferry ghat, some restaurants can be found, which provide a bigger meal to the daily passengers and pilgrims. Along with this, there are shops of religious items. These religious shops are mostly found in Bagbazar ghat, Dakhineswar ghat, Shobabazar ghat etc. As people mainly go to the Princep ghat for travel purpose, a large concentration of different food vendors has been found here.
- Among all the religious items that are sold in those ghats, the number of water jugs is high. At Sheoraphuli Nimai Tritha ghat, these jugs are made of two materials- one made of plastic and the other one made of clay. Some sellers made those clay water containers in their home, while others brought them from others. Apart from those water containers, different other items are also sold in these ghats, where ritual activities are mostly concentrated. Shops selling pictures of Gods, religious threads, *sakha pola* etc. are also seen.
- Instead of high disparity in income structure, people still depend on these *ghats*. They believe that, there may be some changes in near future, when more visitors will come to these ghats and their income structure will improve.
- With the renovation and beautification of these ghats, and as a result of advertisement through various travel blogs, more visitors are now coming to these *ghats* during winter months, during holidays and during weekends. This has increased the number of visitors here and automatically the people who were depended to these *ghats* for their livelihoods are also looking towards a boost in their income structure.

V. Recommendations And Conclusion

Since the income of all those communities mainly depends on the tourist's economic contribution, arrangements should be made so that more people come to visit these ghats. The ghats should be widely publicized so that more people know about them and increase the tourism of the ghats. Beautification of those ghats, maintain the cleanliness should be done in those ghats to attract more people. Cultural events like Ganga Aarti in Babughat should be increase and become popular to draw people's attention. It will help people related to these *ghat* to earn more. Improvement in the transportation and infrastructural facilities is necessary to develop these *ghats*. Development of different types of leisure activities to attract more people in these *ghats*.

The study reveals that, in every Hooghly River *ghat*, many different activities take place. The *ghats* are important for the local people who are depended on them for their livelihoods and economic activities. Some are working in these ghats since their younger days, like the boatmen, the barbers and the priests. People work here as shopkeepers, food vendors, photographers, tourist guide- have started their activities quite later as they thought that, these places may become a good opportunity because the tourism activity is increasing day by day, in these *ghats*. Not only local people to earn for them and for their family, these *ghats* are also attract visitors, who come for different purposes. Some of them come for leisure, some for to perform religious rituals, while others come for work purpose or to use the ferry service. They contribute significantly to the local economy as they spend for different goods and services. However, it can be said that, all these *ghats* act as the hub of cultural and economic activities, which support a diverse community of the region.

References

- [1]. Bardhan, S. & Paul, S. (2019). Envisioning An Eco-Cultural Urban Landscape – Studies On The Ghats Of The River Bhagirathi-Hooghly In Kolkata, India. Conference Paper- IFLA– CL WG's International Symposium On Historic Cultural Landscapes: Succession, Sustainance And Sustainability, At: Seoul, South Korea
- [2]. Bose, A., Basu, A. (2008) "Consumers Perception On Selected (WBSTC & HNJPSS) Ferry Services In Kolkata- A Comparative Insight", International Journal Of Advances In Engineering And Management (IJAEM), Volume-2, Issue-3, Page No. - 697-708, DOI: 10.35629/5252-0203697708
- [3]. Das, B. C., Ghosh, S. & Roy, S. (2021). Anthropogeomorphology Of Bhagirathi-Hooghly River System In India. Routledge
- [4]. Ivermee, R. (2021). Hooghly: The Global History Of A River. Harper Collins
- [5]. Mohanty, S. (2024). Ghats And Ganges. Dimensions Publishers.
- [6]. Swaroop, A., Sharma, S., Kumar, K. (March, April 2023)"Reviving The Soul Of Ganga: A Comprehensive Review Of The Development Of River Front Ghats", International Journal For Multidisciplinary Research, Volume-5, Issue-2.