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The Impact of Development of Kolkata on Tribal Culture of East Kolkata Wetlands

Sana Huque

Abstract

The East Kolkata Wetlands are widely known for being a Ramsar site, for ecological diversity and for its unique functions, especially in the area of water management. The wetlands have another aspect which is far less popularly known, i.e., it is home to nearly 3,000 tribal families. The wetlands have been in news a lot recently over its loss and changing characteristics because of heightened urbanisation along the eastern periphery of Kolkata. Most of these developments along the eastern margin are being attributed to Kolkata's attempt at becoming more favourable towards the demands placed upon urban centres by neoliberalism. Consequently, the tribal culture and customs of a tribal way of life can be found to be under severe duress from practices imported from outside the wetlands. This paper focuses on the impacts of a growing city upon the tribal way of life in the East Kolkata Wetlands. The attempt has been to situate the observations in the context of a city's attempts at reinventing itself as an important destination in the scheme of facilitating neoliberalism in the state of West Bengal.

Keywords: East Kolkata wetlands, neoliberalism, tribal culture

Introduction

The East Kolkata Wetlands are known for being a number of things. It is known for being one among two of world's most precious natural resource for waste water treatment with an areal spread of 12,500 hectares and a desired model for optimum reuse of water to combat global water crisis. It has also been recognised in wetland conservation circles as the mainstay of Kolkata's food security, provider of a number of ecological services like flood control, carbon sequestration, and, pollution control, sustainer of livelihoods for nearly one lakh people and so on. But what is not popularly associated with the wetlands is the fact that it is home to nearly 3,000 tribal households.

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The wetlands have also become popular recently as a natural area that has come under severe threat of destruction from the real estate and land grabbing mafia. The drastic changes that are occurring in the wetlands is the result of the changing political economy of the city of Kolkata. It is no secret that Kolkata's economy and politics have been affected the most by the policies that the Left government adopted during their four decades long regime. The nature of transformation that the city is undergoing whose effects have majorly spilled into the wetlands is attributed to the legacy that the Left rule left behind in the state. The eastern frontier of the city has been changing drastically as a result of this. High-end residential complexes, hotels and restaurants have come up so close to the wetlands that its effects can be felt far and wide across the ecologically sensitive area.

The changes in the characteristics of the wetlands are problematic from a number of perspectives. The first and foremost problem is that the area that is losing its original characteristics is identified globally as a Ramsar site which means that it is a wetland of international importance that is protected under an intergovernmental treaty agreed upon by 169 participating countries. Secondly and a more serious problem is associated with the rapid change of this area which is essential for the overall wellbeing of a major urban centre like Kolkata. Kolkata is currently grappling with numerous serious issues like threats of floods, the increasing levels of pollution and carbon dioxide in air, maintenance of its food security, and a rapidly declining water table and frequent discovery of harmful substances like arsenic in water. The wetlands takes care of all these problems by being the world's largest organic waste water treatment facility that is also contributing economically by saving the city from building additional wastewater treatment facilities.

Losing the wetlands would mean a monumental calamity, both ecological and economical, would befall upon the city. Thirdly, the area upon which the damages are being inflicted is an important biodiversity hotspot that shares a close relationships with the UNESCO heritage site of Sundarbans. These destructive activities are permanently undoing a sensitive ecological zone. But another problem is brewing behind the scene of all the ecological and economic concerns which somehow has managed to evade the attention it deserves. It is the impact and the affects of the ongoing changes upon the tribal culture of the East Kolkata Wetlands.

The juxtaposition of the East Kolkata Wetlands against Kolkata's most rapidly developing area, the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass, has been the primary reason for expediting the influx of the majoritarian urban culture into the wetlands. Consequently, there has been an increased exposure of the tribal population to education, politics, economic life and material culture that is currently dominant in Kolkata. So, the tribal way of life has begun to appear more and more similar to

that of the rest of the inhabitants of the city. Marked changes have become apparent in the aspirations, level of education, exposure to technology and occupation choices of current generation of tribal settlers of the wetlands.

The Tribal Communities of the East Kolkata Wetlands

“Since 2006 this area has changed considerably. This area was only extensive wetlands that looked like the Sundarban jungle when I came here for the first time in 1996. There were no roads, no bridges to allow venture into the interior, no electricity or water connection. However, the last decade has seen a rapid change. This change began because of the way the surrounding area has developed rapidly. This land is originally “ryoti” land that belonged to the tribals who have been settled here and farming the place for many generations now. But when the surroundings began to change the dalals came in hoards and enticed us to give up this land. This is how a large influx of non-tribals happened in the area. Living in this area feels like we are living in the city. We do not have enough means to survive in a city. This has further facilitated the capturing of our lands by outsiders through promoters who are more aggressive. These promoters have greater money and muscle power than the dalals and more prompt at acquiring and selling our lands. All this is illegal as tribal land cannot be sold to non-tribal persons. But our people do not have the means or the resources to challenge such activities. This is how outsiders have come into these areas in large numbers and are displacing us and changing our tribal customs. Our religion, our language, our various customs and traditions have all been affected. Our language Sadri no longer has speakers in the area. Mundari language is almost dead. Our people are more excited for the celebration Durga Puja and Kali Puja than our own festivals.”

The above quote is from Sudam Munda, a resident of East Kolkata Wetlands and a member of one of the tribal communities that call the wetlands home. East Kolkata Wetlands has several tribal communities settled within its confines comprising of more than 3,000 families (Niyogi 2014). In the Kheadaha Gram Panchayat area Mundas are the dominant tribe, but also present are the Santhals, Sardars, and Oraons. The Mundas are among the oldest tribes of the country with origins in Chotanagpur region of present day Jharkhand. Racially, they are proto-australoid and speak Mundari dialect of Austro-Asiatic family (Srivastava 2007). Animism is an important component of Munda culture that has been propagated in the tribe through Sarnaism. In Munda beliefs there exists a “Nature-Man-Spirit Complex” whereby nature, man and spirit share intimate relations with one another (Vidyarthi 1963). Even etymologically the word *Sarna* is derived from the Sal tree - a sacred relic in the religion. Consequently, nature represented by forests is an important component in the culture of Munda community.

The first advent of the tribals in the wetlands near Kolkata occurred when they migrated from Singhbhum, Hazaribagh and Ranchi to work on the farmlands of zamindars or as labourers for the British who were undertaking major constructions in and round Kolkata during their times as the colonial masters of the city. Since then the tribals have been an integral part of the farming and fishing activities that have made the wetlands acquire the recognition of being 'Kidneys of Kolkata' and a model for optimum usage of water. This paper is based on observations of tribal communities, especially of the Munda community, settled in and around the Kheadaha Gram Panchayat of the East Kolkata Wetlands.

The Munda culture is characterised by a number of unique rites and rituals that are dedicated to different aspects of tribal life such as hunting, crop harvesting, combating diseases and evil spirits, and keeping ancestors and gods content. For the Mundas in the wetlands *Karam* is the only tribal festival that is celebrated with a lot of verve. The festivities have a close relation with animistic traditions that involve reverence for nature so that it blesses the worshippers with plenty of sun, rain and green which ultimately will lead to yielding a good harvest.

The rituals of the festival involve worshipping a branch collected from the *Karam* tree (*Nauclea Parvifolia*). The men of the community have the responsibility to go and collect the branch from the nearby forest. However, since there are no forests left in the vicinity of the village the branch is usually collected from a neighbouring village. Some accounts of the *Karam* festival state that the tree branch is carried by young girls and it is an important aspect of the rituals. However, the celebration on which the observations for this paper is based had the men of the village involved in carrying the tree branch. On the day of the festival the *Karam* branch is to be brought to the *Akhra* (the village assembly point that hosts community members for discussions and religious functions) and planted there.

But in case of the celebration in the wetlands the branch is carried to a pandal as no spot is designated as the *Akhra* and is raised at the centre of it the gathering amidst sounds of conch shells and *ulu dhwani*, religious rituals that are popular in festivals and functions of the Bengali community. A *pahan* or a priestly figure is appointed to conduct the prayers. The womenfolk are entrusted with decorating the branch and with the songs and dance. A visible excitement regarding the *Dhamsha madol* (drums) was noted that had been brought especially to be played during the celebration. It was apparent that the drums had acquired a sense of novelty despite being known for having an intimate association with tribal identity. Preparations for a feast involving the residents of the participating villages is an important part of the celebration in the wetlands along with songs and dance which are a night long affair that also involve heavy drinking of the home-made rice beer *hadiya*. Apart from *Karam* the Munda culture has a host of

other festivals like *Sarhul*, *Phagun*, *Roghara*, *Bisu Sikor*, *Mage Parab*, *Ba Parab*, *Batauli* among others (Srivastava 2007).

The field work was conducted in 2016-2017. The study relies on ethnographic approaches in which semi-structured interviews and participant observations were used to collect information from the field. During field work, mention of none of these festivals came up. Apart from *Karam* the festival that the community members look forward to the most is Durga Puja. Doing field visits in the months of September and October which coincides with the festive time in Bengal it was observed that the tribals are not only celebrating Durga Puja and Kali Puja but also some minor deities like Vishwakarma, and Laxmi. The manner of celebration is also the same as the rest of the city. Pandals, idols, a *purohit moshai* or priest, and loud speakers that blare the latest Bengali and Hindi film songs are all part of the setup.

The Mundas of the East Kolkata Wetlands have more or less assimilated into the larger Bengali-Hindu culture of Kolkata. Except for *Karam* no other festival with tribal roots are being celebrated in the wetlands. Apart from festivals the tribal homes in their daily lives have also moved away from performance of tribal rituals to Hindu rituals. For instance, many tribal homes in the wetlands now have a *tulsi mancha* placed centrally in their courtyards. Similarly, pictures and figurines of Shiva, Vishnu and Laxmi are worshipped in many homes. The intimacy with nature which is at the centre of Munda culture, is no longer central to the cultural life of the Mundas of East Kolkata Wetlands. They are not just aspiring but in many cases are also living a very urban life dominated by the cultural praxis of the city. In fact, like the rest of Kolkata, consumerism appears to have occupied the central spot in the lives of the persons from the tribal community.

The location of the wetlands has emerged as the primary determinant in the loss of tribal culture in the area. The proximity of the wetlands to Kolkata's most rapidly transforming areas, i.e., the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass, Bidhannagar and Rajarhat, has exposed the community to material culture of Kolkata that is currently attempting a quick transformation into a "world class city". The pursuit of this image has resulted in a drastic change of political ecology of the city and the wetlands.

A changing City: from Marsh to Model Towns

Since being conceived on marshes the city of Kolkata has come a long way. From a cluster of three villages to becoming the third largest urban agglomerate in India, Kolkata has undoubtedly undergone stupendous transformations. However, the politics and the economic situation in West Bengal in the last four to five decades have determined in a major way the direction that not only the

city but also the wetlands are pursuing currently. When the British ruled the city as its colonial masters the wetlands were looked upon with great disdain. For instance Goode, a British Deputy Chairman of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation, had the following to say about the wetlands - "There are probably many European residents of Calcutta who have never heard of the Salt Lakes, and yet if one of the early sanitarians of the city were to rise from his grave and to be interviewed on the health of Calcutta, he would almost certainly preface his remarks by enquiries about this marshy swamp" (Goode 1916).

Yet the city has grown and continued to expand at the expense of the marshlands that were so greatly despised. The rate of this expansion picked up in the 1960s due to a number of reasons. The already existing large population, the additional influx of immigrants due to partition and the cholera epidemic of 1958 made it imperative that the city find housing and sanitation solutions. Consequently, Bidhannagar was conceived. Between 1962 and 1967 thus begun the reclamation of the wetlands which was followed by the construction of the EM Bypass in the 1980s (Ghosh and Sen 1987). In between the Development Perspective Plan (DPP) was published in 1976 which emphasised upon a polycentric model of development along the east-west spatial growth axis of the city (Mukherjee, 2015). The Basic Development Plan (BDP) of 1966 however had advocated on a bi-nodal approach of urban development along the north-south axis of the city (KMPO 1966; KMDA 1976).

The DPP's suggestion not only violated the previous proposal, it also instigated the real estate speculation in the eastern periphery of the city which is also the location of the East Kolkata Wetlands (Mukherjee 2015). The above-mentioned developments mark the beginning of wetland modification as we know of it today. By the time Rajarhat was developed the wetlands were already shrunk in size and surrounded by a number of townships like the East Kolkata Township and Baishnabghata Patuli Township. These developments not only brought about a change in the physical aspects of the wetlands but the cultural lives of the tribals were also permeated with the urban way of life.

The state of the economy of West Bengal over the years is also partly responsible for the state of affairs that have emerged in the wetlands. West Bengal's economic decline more or less coincides with the attempts of expanding the city of Kolkata. Although the Bidhannagar project eventually ended up as a housing project for high income families it was conceived to provide affordable housing to the large number of middle and low income families who had made Kolkata their home. The eighties marked the beginning of the decline that has now become synonymous with the image of a black hole of poverty and a dying city (words famously uttered by Rajiv Gandhi). Since then West Bengal's per capita income has been below the national average and the state has been having difficulty in recovering itself from being the lowest among the middle income

states (*Untenable Umbrage*, 2003). In 2000-2001 the Net State Domestic Product of West Bengal was lowest among the states of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Haryana, Maharashtra and Punjab. Once a forerunner in the production of steel, textiles, jute and so on Bengal became a state that experienced widespread flight of industries. In FY81 Bengal had a contribution of 7.8% to the GDP of India which had declined to 6.5% in FY10 (Pricewater Coopers 2011).

However, winds of change in the form of neoliberalism finally did arrive in West Bengal. The Left government that propagated the idea of a welfare state by championing the rights of farm and factory workers, by the early 2000s had wholeheartedly embraced the neoliberal model of development. It became the period of “Reform, Perform or Perish”. Under Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya the Left in Bengal decided to relax the ideological constraints against neoliberal development model and immersed itself completely into courting overseas investments. Thus, there was a conscious roll-back of the state and major downsizing of the government. The government went as far as to acknowledge that the previous policies of the government such as doing away with education in English or the disinterest in tackling poor labour relations had been wrong and these fallacies on part of the government have been the cause of landing the state into the trap of fleeing business.

But the city still did not become a preeminent node in circuits of capital and empire and is continued to be bypassed in stature by Mumbai, Delhi, and Bangalore (Mehta 2004; Dupont 2011; Goldman 2011; Bose 2014). The remedy to this situation was seen in boosting the real estate sector. With a large Bengali diaspora this measure became an easy reality. Messages similar to the one below from Mamata Banerjee has been played to nonresident and diasporic Bengalis to urge them to invest in West Bengal - “I welcome you all and this is your state. Please come here and share your ideas, views and give suggestions to make this state better and I know you all love your state and have sentiments attached to the soil” (Sen Gupta 2012). This also marked the beginning of increasing relevance of the status of a world-class city for Kolkata. The Municipal Corporation, in spite of maintaining a pro-poor stance, began to draw plans for improving the city infrastructure as well as the urban aesthetics under capacity building programme and Kolkata Environmental Improvement Project (KEIP) by delving into land management and public private partnerships. All these developments have acted as major impetus to real estate speculation along the eastern margin of the city that borders the East Kolkata Wetlands.

Impact of urban intrusion upon Tribal Life

In India as neoliberal policies have spread, the tribal dominated areas have been increasingly enervated of their traditional customs. The method of ‘acculturation’ or ‘culture contact’ by which tribal absorption occurs into majoritarian cultural

and religious fold has received a major boost from increasing urbanisation in India which has received a major stimulus from neoliberalism. Open market practices and urbanisation have fueled a consumerist culture ubiquitously in the country from which tribal communities have also not been spared. In this context it is pertinent to remember Bose who said, “Culture...flows from a politically and economically dominant group to a subservient one” (Bose 1975). Consequently, the culture of consumerism that has emerged among the urban elites have begun to percolate into the tribal groups too. These developments in the country are changing the tribal way of life, forever in some cases. The changes in the lives and the livelihoods of the tribal persons living in the wetlands are a proof of the implications of growing influence of capitalism. Based on Karat and Rawal’s (2014) work the impacts that are emerging indicate the changing nature of the wetland tribal communities as a consequence of rapid urbanisation and neoliberalism.

The observable traits are:

- Landlessness among the tribal communities are on the rise. Many of the previous *bheris* or fishery ponds and agricultural fields have been converted to residential land.
- In most of today’s tribal households the current generation has moved on from engaging in fishing and farming activities. In fact, even the older generation is happy with this transformation.
- The number of educated youths among the tribals have gone up considerably.
- Most notably the pace of land conversion has increased at the expense of land owned or worked upon by tribals which involves private real estate developers as well as certain policies of the state.

In India the proportion of rural tribal households that do not own any land has increased. As per NSSO’s survey, between 1987-88 and 2011-12 the percentage of tribal persons who do not own any land rose from 16% to 24% (Karat and Rawal 2014). The same research has found that loss of land and dispossession among the tribals have become a prominent attribute of their livelihoods in the last two decades. Therefore, proletarianisation of tribal persons have become a common occurrence in the country (Karat and Rawal 2014). When these observations are examined in light of what is happening at the wetlands, there appears to be a parity in the occurrences in most tribal dominated areas. In short in the wetlands as well as in most part of the country, the tribals are losing land and the losses have been in the name of furthering development that itself is being propelled by capitalism.

In the state of West Bengal although about 5% of the total population are identified as tribals, the state is not covered under the Fifth or Sixth Schedules of

the Indian constitution. As a result the tribal lands do not enjoy any constitutional protection (Karat and Rawal 2014). Since urbanisation has become a widespread phenomenon in the country, many of the tribal lands have become spaces with real estate potential. In east Kolkata the wetlands in general and the tribal lands in the area in particular have become prone to encroachment because of the primary reason of rapid urbanisation in the adjoining areas and more implicitly because the lands can be acquired from the poor tribals at very cheap price and without much resistance. During field visits it was revealed that previously when land demand in the area had not experienced the sudden jump the tribal lands exchanged hands among people who belonged to the same community. However, since real estate prices have sky-rocketed in the area, non-tribal persons have begun to acquire their land. These acquisitions have most times happened under duress either from politically backed real estate agents or from the raging poverty that most tribal households in the area are afflicted with.

The incursion of urban built-up area into the wetlands is also emerging as significant impact upon the cultural lives of the people who are living in the area. Because of the invasion of the city into the tribal way of life, an imposition of majoritarian culture, i.e., middle class Hindu Bengali lifestyle, has become predominantly observable in the area. Although the poverty prevalent in the area prevents the people from overcoming the class limits in most cases, the aspiration for such a development has become highly desirable among these people.

Places in which cultural pluralism exist, there also exist the constant threat that traditions of ethnic minorities will get devoured by majoritarian cultural forces and/or by modern lifestyles and contemporary technologies. Tribal communities all over the Indian landmass have been affected and transformed by the extension of “mainstream” administrative and economic frontiers into their lands. Martin Oran’s (1959) paper *A Tribal People in an Industrial Setting* regarding the Santhal community noted how the social conditions among the tribal persons improved among those who worked in industry and lived in the company-provided housing. In some tribal dominated areas like the north-eastern states of India the coming of the Christian missionaries have also brought improvements in education and health-care.

However, on the flip side instances of hinduization of tribal communities like Bhils, Gonds, Mundas and Oraons have resulted in a general decline in standards of living, a shrinkage of their cultural canvas and a “loss of nerve” (Madan 1994). It can be briefly mentioned here that the term “Loss of Nerve” was coined by Verrier Elwin (1902-1964), a British anthropologist, ethnologist and tribal activist. Elwin strongly believed in isolating tribal communities to protect them from repercussions of contact with the more sophisticated people from the plains. Later he modified his views slightly as he understood that total isolation was no

longer feasible. So, the most obvious approach for him was to allow education and health care permeate into the tribes so that the tribes themselves can advance to the level of rest of the country.

A major cultural shift in the tribal areas of the wetlands can be gauged from the manner in which religion has begun to be practiced in the area. Practice of Hindu rituals have come to occupy as much or even more significance in their lives as their other tribal practices. Consequently, incursion of Hindu festivals and Hindu Gods and Goddesses have become very popular in the tribal areas. Similarly, more than the tribal language, Bengali has come to be used for communication in this area. Because the people have to venture into the larger Bengali society for work and other day to day activities, Sadri - their original language, has come to occupy a backseat while Mundari has suffered a near complete annihilation from the people's dialect. In the schools of the area the medium of instruction is Bengali. The curriculum has no initiative to include tribal language and history as these are perceived to be redundant in preparing students for a future living and working in a city. Consequently, the young generation is getting increasingly alienated from both their tribal language and culture.

While Sanskritic Hinduism which has a pan-India spread has shown a remarkable capacity of assimilating elements from other cultures, local cultures too have borrowed from the Sanskritic reservoir of beliefs and practices (Madan 2006). Weber termed this two-way exchange as Extensive Hinduisation and Intensive Hinduisation. While the former process referred to the absorption of tribal and other external communities into the Hindu way of life, the latter drew attention of the imposition of Sanskritic Hinduism upon local traditions already regarded as Hindu (Madan 1994).

M.N. Srinivas had famously termed the latter phenomenon as 'Sanskritisation'. He says - "The caste system is far from a rigid system in which the position of each caste is fixed for all time. Movement has always been possible, and especially so in the middle regions of the hierarchy. A low caste was able, in a generation or two, to rise to a higher position in the hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism, and by Sanskritising its ritual and pantheon. In short, it took over, as far as possible, the customs, rites, and beliefs of the Brahmins, and the adoption of the Brahmanic way of life by a low caste" (Mohan 2006). Like Srinivas, Bose observed that new material objects as well as new ideas associated with the "culture of the conquerors" naturally enjoy superior prestige and even economic value amongst those belonging to the "vanquished culture" (Munshi 1979).

While Srinivas and Bose were propounding their theory from the perspective of caste system in Indian society, the process is true for tribal groups as well who

have come in contact with the larger Hindu society. The motivation behind this aspiration of tribals to assimilate with the mainstream culture is unraveled by the rhetorical question posed by Bose - "Who does not crave to be honoured by those who are held in honour?" (Bose 1975). Like Srinivas, Bose too had observed that in Hindu society there was a tendency in each lower order caste to imitate the rites and customs of the higher order castes' and had arrived at the conclusion that to be honoured the easiest device is clearly to imitate those held in honour (Bose 1975; Munshi 1979).

Conclusion

The assimilation of tribal communities into the larger majoritarian culture is a truth that is affecting not just the tribal communities of East Kolkata Wetlands but it is the reality affecting the whole country. As the nation progresses more and more down the path of neoliberalism and more areas become urbanised, the "loss of nerve" has to become inevitable. The consequences emerging from the assimilation with the dominant culture is completely not lost upon the members of the Munda community of the wetlands. Some of them understand that their culture and way of life is on the verge of collapse because the city has infiltrated the wetlands. Some of the members have begun initiatives in their community to revive their cultural heritage by reintroducing festivals and important anniversaries linked with tribal identity. But they know the difficulties that lie ahead. Therefore they like to say, '*Nagani'ra pheliteche bishakto nishshash, shei bishakto nishshash se dur'e rohek lagi*' (a phrase in Mundari which says, the snakes are breathing down upon us their poisonous breath, we have to stay away from their venomous sighs).

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