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## Sundarbans: Acculturation of Tribal Communities

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### **Abstract :**

The Sundarban region is one of the most water-forest-swamp areas in the south-easternmost province of India and is a diverse reservoir of socio-economic, religious and folk culture. This region is the land of relatively ancient civilization. The ancient lower caste Poundras or Pods are the majority population of this region. This predominantly Pundra region was later populated by Muslims, Christians, Portuguese, Mugh, Firingi and Tribal peoples. As the British took over the colonial power of Bengal, they adopted a plan to capture the Sundarbans in order to expand the agricultural land and increase the revenue. During this time the forest area was divided into different areas and given to the landlords, latdars and leaseholders. They brought tribal people from Chhotnagpur, Manbhum, Singhbhum region for the need of skilled labor in forest harvesting. These tribal people like Santal, Munda, Oraon, Ho, Bhumij etc. started living on the condition of getting agricultural land without going back to their native land. Later, the little land they were under the control of the zamindars, latdars, leaseholders etc. They are forced to engage in occupations like farming, fishing and crab hunting, collecting wax and honey from the forest in order to save their lives.

Not only did the profession change; Due to their long residence in the Sundarbans region, they have adapted various norms and features of the local socioculture. Particularly among the Sundarbans, the worship of the main deity called

'Marangburu' or 'Singbonga' is disconnected. As the main component of their Karam Puja is the Karam tree, they worship the Kadam tree of this region instead. Moreover, along with the worship of deities like Tusu, Bhadu, etc., they expanded the religious sphere by connecting with the local Hindu society's deities like Dakshinaraya, Vanadevi, Vishalakshi, Kaluraya, Gangadevi, etc. Moreover, the tribals continue to live their struggling lifestyle through the adjustment, change, evolution and adaptation of clothing, food habits, home construction, linguistic and tribal justice systems.

**Keyword:** Diverse, Reservoir, Swamp, Predominantly, Component, Adaptation

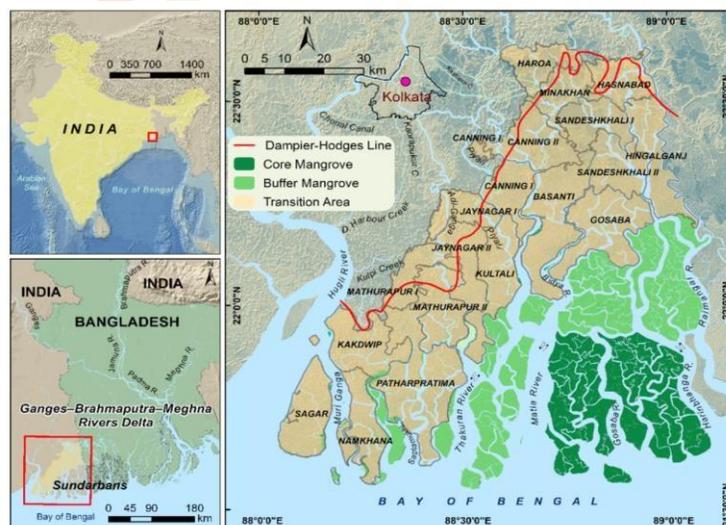
## Objective of the study:

Here my prime objective is to highlight the society, religion and educational culture of the tribal people living in the contemporary period in a new way. Analyzing the people's life and culture of the Sundarbans region emerging from various source and presenting the outline of the adaptation, evolution, changing and mixing that have taken place in the socio-economic pattern, religious affairs, daily life and folk culture of the tribals of this region along with living and occupational changes in the new geographical environment.

## Introduction :

Culture is the essence of any civilization. The image of a society and civilization emerges in the mirror of culture. Every society is bright in its own characteristics, but in its flowing stream the connection and separation of different forms of life becomes a natural phenomenon, which is not an exception observed in Sundarbans human civilization. Here the currents of normal social order flow normally. Here the location of different religious communities and socio-cultures has not only manifested in unique characteristics, but also the transformed aspect of a special culture developed through mutual healthy coexistence and harmony exists in the developing process.

The Sundarbans region is spread over an area of 25,500 sq.km. on the coast of the Bay of Bengal at the mouth of the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers. After the division of the country, the area of Indian Sundarbans is 9630 sq.km., whose boundaries extend from Ichhamati-Kalindi-Raimangal in the east to the Hooghly River in the west and from the Dampier-Hodges line in the north to the Bay of Bengal in the south. The Sundarbans located in north and south 24 Parganas of India was once a richly populated area and at other times it succumbed to the whims of nature and turned into a deep forested uninhabitable swamp through several rivers and creeks. And the people here migrated and built settlements in safer places. Dense forests have developed in abandoned areas. Later, people cleared the forest and built new settlements. In this way, the flow of people in the Sundarbans region has been going on forever.



Indian Sundarbans

## Literature Review:

Here the overall life course of the marginalized people of Sundarbans is indicated. In order to understand this life course of the tribes, the literature of various authors on regional culture has been observed. None of them shed light on the life and culture of the grassroots people of the region in detail. It is completely different. Among those who have previously worked on the Sundarban region are Sankarananda Mukhopadhyay: A Profile of Sundarban Tribes, W.W.Hunter: A Statistical Account of Bengal, vol-1, A.K. Mondal & R.K.Ghosh: Sundarban: A Socio BioEcological Study, A.M.F.Abdul Jolil: Bangladesher Santal:Samaj O Sanskriti, S.C.Roy : The Mundas and their Countries etc.

## Methodology:

Some articles, different thesis, reports, News and letters are the supporting documents. Several museums and regional libraries were visited and gathered relevant information, helps from some erudite teachers, experts, renowned scholars are also taken. A number of other relevant primary and secondary sources of information on the selected topic are also used here.

## Analysis :

People have evolved various cultures due to the need to fulfill their social demands. Each community lives in its own cultural milieu but maintains the flow of life through harmony with its surrounding environment. The inevitable result of this continuous coexistence is the exchange of material between multiple cultures. In this way, if the adaptation of cultural elements between two different groups take place continuously, it is acculturation. This process of acculturation does not always happen in the same way, sometimes it happens spontaneously and sometimes it happens under environmental compulsion or pressure. It is often observed that the generally backward comparatively underdeveloped social groups try to draw a particular linear portrait by adopting various cultural elements from the relatively advanced and dominant social systems.

According to the anthropologists, the original inhabitants of Bengal i.e. the Sundarbans, especially the Santals, were pre-Dravidian people<sup>(1)</sup>. They were called Proto-Australoids or Proto-Australs in this anthropic language, and belonged to the Austric language group.

The physical structure of people of the Austrian group is generally slender. They have long to medium skulls, flat and wide nostrils, dark complexion and wavy hair. A special similarity is observed with the tribals, especially the Santals. Like Austrians, their appearance is usually black. Some have flat nose, thick lips, curly hair and medium height<sup>(2)</sup>. From this idea, it is assumed that the Santals are people of the Austric group. At one time, this group ranged from North India to

Easter Island in the Pacific Ocean. Some anthropologists believe that they went from India to the Australian continent approximately thirty thousand years ago.

Scholars differ on when and how this Austric-speaking population came to be known as Santals. According to Skrefsrud, the Santal word is derived from Soontar<sup>(3)</sup>. Others say, they lived in 'Saant' or feudal land for a long time, so their common name became Santal. Many people also call the eastern ethnic identity of Santals as 'Kherwad'<sup>(4)</sup>. Almost all the researchers have agreed that they are not natives of this country - outsiders<sup>(5)</sup>.

The Santal, Munda, Oraon, Ho, Bhumij-tribals of Chotanagpur, Santal Pargana and Kolhan regions are the main ones participating in the operation to clear the forests of the vast Sundarbans region<sup>(6)</sup> and make them suitable for arable land and cultivation. At the initial stage they came to the region and received a portion of the acquired land for farming and subsistence under contract of labor. This small piece of land was their main asset. Based on it, they vowed to build a settlement in this region. Most of them soon became landless citizens without being able to protect the land even if they got it. Behind this was the narrow self-interested mindset of the landlords, latdars and their various brokers. They are bewildered by deprivation and their simple mindedness is suppressed as well as their immense faith is dishonored and humiliated. The life practices of the tribals of the Sundarbans region have been shaped in this cruel irony. The tribals of the Sundarban region have witnessed a continuous life-suffering history of ups and downs, aspirations, despair, temptation and exploitation.

The people of all these tribal communities left their habitats in the plateau and moved towards the remote eastern province of Sundarbans, and through manual labour, acquired forests and became arable land for the benefit of landlords and leaseholders. In the surrounding conditions of that time, instead of labor, the plan of permanent residence was adopted based on the small portion of land obtained from the landlords and in view of which tribal villages were established in various parts of the Sundarbans region. Despite the vast differences with the geographical features of their motherland, they have to face various adverse conditions while living in rivers, creeks and tidal lands with saline soil and mangrove forests. The conflict and struggle between these two different situations in the tribal way of life of the Sundarbans region has started from the earliest stages of life here. In the context of living for a long time, the tribal culture of the Sundarbans region has taken a harmonious form due to changes and refinements through the collision of various material and non-material cultural ideas, and sometimes the tribal life continues to flow in its own way by adapting to the local culture even after renouncing some of the characteristics of its own life culture.

The main branches of the tribal population have settled in different parts of the Sundarbans region. Munda communities mainly settled in Sandeshkhali, Gosaba, Canning, Hasnabad, Hingaljanj, Basanti, Kultali, Patharpratima and various parts of Kakdwip. Santal tribals are mainly found in Haroa, Canning, Basanti, Sagar, Kultali, Namkhana regions. Oraon communities in Canning, Basanti, Sandeshkhali,

Meenakhate; Among the tribal communities, the Hoes live mainly in Canning, Basanti, Kultali, Namkhana region and Bhumij in Gosaba, Canning, Basanti, Hasnabad, Hingalgaon and Sandeshkhali<sup>(7)</sup>. These tribals living in different parts of the Sundarban region are unable to properly protect their traditional tradition.

Due to variations in geographical location, climate and soil, material differences are observed in the construction of habitable houses of the Sundarbans tribals. Also, due to the environmental conditions, they are forced to give priority to the local custom in terms of house building techniques. Although the walls of the homes of the Santals in their native land are artistically decorated with various colors and designs, the traditional style of art is not followed here.

An important phase of the Indian tribal lifestyle is the metamorphosed way of life. Arriving from a distant region and in the initial stage of settling in a completely new environment felt the need for temporary mental preparation to adapt oneself to an unfamiliar social culture. Therefore, even though they are exposed to a completely different socio-economic and ecological context, they soon try to adapt to various cultural adaptations. They built the village roughly maintaining the aboriginal characteristic layout of the houses. The affinity of the turnip tree with the Santal tribes was very close. However, as the natural diversity of this region soon broke the relationship with the Shal, Mahua, they created a new lifestyle by embracing the biodiverse mangrove forest environment. At the same time, the worship of the main deity called 'Marangburu' or 'Singbonga' among the tribal villagers of Sundarbans continued to be disconnected. Because many mountains and hilly environments were associated with this deity, but due to lack of that environment in the region, their need gradually decreased in the mind of the tribal people. Incidentally, Marangburu was originally the name of a hill. The ancestors of all tribals worshiped the Marangburu hill near their place of residence as a deity due to various reasons.

Villages were not developed here based on tribal community orientation. Because of the original habitat of Chotanagpur region villages are formed according to different groups. But the tribals coming to the Sundarbans region i.e. Santal, Munda, Oraon, Ho, Bhumij etc. groups have come together and established villages.

As a result, the location of villages is not observed on the basis of their individual groups. Again, their traditional tribal practices are not followed in the governance of the villages. It has not been able to preserve its own governance-centric originality in the management and planning of rural administration. It can be seen that no 'Dhumkuria' or 'Akhara' has been established in Oraon village. Villagers are disconnected from Munda's 'Shasandiri'. Although Pahan and Mahato are one of the administrators of the local governance system, their activities are not restricted. And they became weak. At the outskirts of the village is the residence of the deity or the Holy Hurst, called 'Jaherthan'. At present its necessity and its value in the overall life of the tribals has been reduced.

'Bongas' are present in most of the places of the religious and daily life of the tribals. As they seek greater happiness and comfort by appeasing the benefic Bongas through worship, they pray for deliverance from all kinds of evils by appeasing the fervor of the inauspicious Bongas. Given the natural environment of the Chotanagpur Santal Parganas, i.e. rugged hills, dunes, mountain springs and raging streams of rivers, this metaphysical thought developed and shaped the overall way of life. Although that thought flourished in this biodiverse environment, it was not completely abandoned. Tribals of the Sundarbans region have revived the metaphysical energy in the new environment but it is flowing in a weak stream, the expression of this idea is seen in their various worships.

Tribals coming from far away and living in a completely new environment are losing their identity to a large extent. As a result of immersion in the different environment here, various changes are seen in the tribal life. Most notable is the reduction in group rigidity in tribal life in the Sundarbans. Due to adverse conditions and changing environment, the lifestyles of all communities have merged. They are not known to the common people of the Sundarbans region by their separate tribal names such as Santal, Munda, Oraon, Ho, Bhumij etc. They are collectively known as 'aborigines'. However, their difference with the other local people living in this region is clearly observed. They have come to be known locally as 'Buno' due to their settlement, living and coming from forest areas<sup>(8)</sup>.

A review of the tribal social system of the Sundarbans shows that there is a clear cultural mix between the Santal, Munda, Oraon and Bhumij etc. Due to their prolonged exposure to the dominant and dominant Hindu culture in the changing social system, they gradually adopted Hindu ideology and made some changes in their lifestyle. It is natural in the changing course of social systems that when two lifestyles with different cultural characteristics have been in flux for a long time, there is an exchange of ideas between each other. In this context the influence of dominant culture is more felt. Notably, the change that can be witnessed in the tribal society here has taken place completely spontaneously, no ideology has been forced upon another. At various times they have adopted the mentality and lifestyle of the local people as necessary to reconcile with adverse environmental conditions and to sustain themselves in different socio-economic contexts.

Along with the ups and downs of the socio-economic system, the land ownership acquired by them in the initial phase of settlement here has gradually ruined and they turned into agricultural laborers and fishermen. Many have taken to earning a living by making bamboo and rattan furniture. However, tribal women are still active in maintaining the functioning of the family through the 'Rice-beer' preparation system that has been handed down in the tribal tradition. The consumption of modern beverages is increasing among men in comparison with the 'Rice-beer'. However, the people of the scheduled caste community here did not refrain from drinking of Rice-beer. They are also joining with the people of the tribal community and they getting experience of the tribal drink 'Rice-beer'.

Economic decline has shifted the indigenous lifestyles of the region to one another. The struggle for survival of the landless indigenous people has intensified with the unfamiliar environmental conditions. They have managed to earn a living through the dangerous environment, ignoring the attacks of crocodiles in the water and tigers in the den. Many have penetrated the life of forest resources collecting honey, beeswax, wood. Many have directly mastered the art of fishing in the rivers and converted into fishermen. In particular, many tribal women have mastered the profession of crab fishing in rivers. Although hunting or catching fish in the river is not their traditional professional lifestyle, in a critical situation of living in the Sundarbans, they enter this profession and enter into a difficult cycle of family struggle. For this reason, there has been a special match between the indigenous communities of the Sundarbans region with their local customs. They have assimilated to the environment of the region due to their patriarchal lifestyle.



Tribal Women : Rice-beer preparer and seller

This adaptation has occurred in several forms. Many of the tribal women adorn themselves with ornaments made of wood, clay or castor and have become accustomed to using metal ornaments such as gold, silver, bronze etc. However, the practice of wearing gold ornaments is very rare in tribal society. Similar to the women of the local Bengali society, tribal women also wear various types of body ornaments; For example, they wear hansuli in the neck, garland and tabich which is called Mandali in Saotali language, in the nose is noth and spider, in the ear is pendant, in the sinthi, in the hand is bala, bangle and batpal, in the arm is baju, komarbischa or waist band, in the leg there is benti - in their language banki, in the toe. Batri, rings on the fingers and dhamas are worn on the head and pankanta etc<sup>(9)</sup>.

Based on various religious practices, rules and regulations, worship by Brahmins in tribal homes, reading of Panchali of Lakshmi, reading of Ramayana and Mahabharata, hoisting of sky-lamps, etc., reflect the adoption of local idioms. Apart from this, tulsi manchas are set up in their premises and evening lamps are lit to pay homage to the goddess. Harinam sankirtan is practiced in tribal families. In this way, the local religious thought has been infiltrated in the arrangement of worshiping of their own gods and goddesses. Their own religious gods and goddesses such as

Singbonga, Dharmesh, Devimayi, Marangburu, worshipping of various types of bonga and supernatural powers, as well as secular gods and goddesses of Sundarban Hindu society such as - Banabibi, Shitala, Vishalakshi, Kaluraya, Dakshinaraya, Manasa, Kali and Gangadevi etc. are connected and their religiously expanded the sphere. Like other communities, the tribes have trusted these gods and goddesses to protect them from the natural adversities and attacks of wild animals of the forest. However, the worship of these gods and goddesses prevalent in the Hindu society did not come into the role of a rival to the 'Bonga' prevailing in their own society, nor did it cause them to deviate from their basic religious beliefs. The worshipping of both gods and goddesses and their coexistence outlined a mixed religious culture.

The foreign Christian community made radical changes in the religious life of this simple and poverty-stricken tribal human community. After the arrival of the Portuguese in Bengal in the 16th century, the Portuguese clergy continued to preach Christianity and started converting the people of the lower castes in the country. However, in addition to tribal people such as Santal, Munda, Oraon, Bhumij etc., people of lower caste Hindu communities have accepted Christianity and are included in it. It is worth noting here that the number of natives who have been converted by the ideals of Christianity is very small. Education, medical treatment, employment, temporary financial facilities and missionary service activities are among the reasons for conversion. Moreover, a number of tribals have been active in accepting Christianity out of the intention of guaranteeing freedom from exploitation, oppression and persecution by the local Hindu-Muslim community. Despite their living in Hindu and Muslim dominated areas, the Hindu community did not try to assimilate them and the Muslim community did not show the courage to convert them to Islam. This neglectful attitude of the region's majority Hindu-Muslim community is largely encouraging the tribals to convert themselves to Christianity.

In the tribal human life of the Sundarbans region there has been an important change in the linguistic features. The tribals have become accustomed to the local Bengali language instead of the Alchiki, Sadri, Mundari, Saotali languages of their traditional homeland. The majority of the present generation have the practical features of the local language. They are believed to have been forced into linguistic changes due to environmental conditions. Because of the research, it can be said with certainty that the opportunity of learning in their own language is very limited and they have also lost its relevance due to lack of use of their own language in public or private department or in various fields. After all, the local language has influenced itself due to their long residence in these regional communities. As the indigenous people realize the need to adapt themselves to the local language and culture in view of this reality, the attraction to their own language also diminishes.

With the role of the official panchayat system, the earlier rural local judicial system of the Sundarbans has undergone special changes. The rural 'Salishinama' administered by the Moral-Matabbar of the region has come to a slow end and the indigenous community-centred local administration has also become moribund. As the role of the village headman 'Majhi' and his assistants 'Paramanik' and 'Yoga Majhi' in the tribal society has diminished, so has the power of

the tribal Samajpati 'Pargana' and his assistant 'Karji'. The previous hereditary self-governing structures of the tribals were loosened and largely bounded by local governance practices.

The staple food of the tribals is rice, followed by eggs, fish and rat meat. They eat the meat of domesticated quadrupeds and bipeds such as sheep, goats, pigs, ducks, chickens etc. They eat the meat of hunted animals except domesticated animals in special ceremonies. But nowadays this hunting trend has been reduced to a great extent. Various government restrictions and lack of adequate animal resources are among the reasons for this. They follow a vegetarian diet like the people of the local Hindu-Muslim community and have a variety of vegetables in their diet. Moreover, they prepare Chira, Muri, Khai in milk and milk with sugar and dry food. 'Torani' (commonly known as 'Pantabhat') is one of the favorite morning food of common and poor tribals. But like the local people here many educated and wealthy tribal families are getting used to Hotchpotch, pulaos, Biryani, Parota, Chowmin etc. The trend of consuming these foods in various festivals is also observed among the common tribals. Besides, it various types of pitha made by tribal women such as - Pakano pitha, Saji pitha, Vapa pitha, Puli pitha, Pati sapta, Telerpitha, Chiti pitha etc. are considered as one of their favorite foods.

The aspect of traditional clothing in tribal society is particularly noticeable. The men of this society wear a special cloth called 'loincloth' which is one hand wide and three hands long. They wear this dress by hand at home. Apart from this dress, usually men from poor families use a chador as a dress when going to markets or relatives' houses. But in the changed situation, tribal men of wealthy families wear Dhoti, Lungi instead of loincloth. Moreover, the educated tribals have become accustomed to wearing different types of modern clothes like pants, shirts, pajamas, Punjabi, etc., like the Hindu culture of this region.

The typical dress worn by tribal women is a coarse saree or fata cloth. It is their traditional custom to wear two pieces of fata cloth, one wrapped around the waist below the knees and the other piece covering the chest and hanging over the left shoulder towards the back. However, women from educated and financially well-off families wear sarees, blouses, shayas, salwars like Bengalis. Thus they entered the local custom of wearing the saree along the ankles instead of below the knee. In this way, it can be seen that the tribal men and women have adopted the local customs of the region and made significant changes in their dressing. The local delicacy has replaced the previous meditations centered on their native land. This evolutionary mental transformation is a manifestation of long-standing regional characteristics.



Bhumij Tribal women Tribal Fishermen adapted to local dress code

A special ceremony in the life of the tribals is the use of 'Sikka' marks on the body. This wound mark is used from the left elbow to the middle of the wrist. Wound marks are usually an odd number, i.e. one, three, five or nine. It is common for boys to use this sign at the age of twelve years. To give this sign, a piece of cloth is rolled up to a thickness of one and a half inches, its tip is set on fire and it is held in the hand. Similarly girls wear 'tatt' or 'khoda' mark from wrist to middle of elbow or chest. These symbols carry deep religious and national identity. In the tribal society of the Sundarbans region, the intention to adopt this special symbol has largely faded away.

As the celebration of festivals like Karam Parva, Sarhul, Sakrat, Sohrai, Tusu, Malsis etc. reveals the unique characteristics of their tribal culture, the social culture of Sundarbans is flowing in a mixed stream by adopting Gajan festival, Mansar Jhapan, Nagarkirtana etc. Another part of the festival of the tribal society is the cock fight. It is celebrated at certain places in the village from the months of December to March. People of different communities participate in these festivals and fairs, including roosters. Due to the long coexistence, the Hindu society of this region has adapted itself to the traditional culture by performing the 1st Baisakh fair, Ras festival, Harinama Sankirtana, Kali Puja, Saraswati Puja, Zantal, Bonobibi fair-festival and worship. A special aspect of adoption of social norms is observed in bridal ceremonies. According to the tradition of tribal society the bridal ceremony is performed under the supervision of 'Pahan'. Many others are going through performed by Brahmin priest in presence of Pahan. Moreover, their Shasthi Puja and Shradha rituals are also performed by Brahmin priests. Again, during the cremation procession with the corpse of the tribal family, Harinama Sankirtana is chanted according to the local Hindu tradition, which is followed by the local tradition.

In addition to many of the tribals adopting Christianity, the non-Christian tribals also participate in the Barodin festival on December 25th. However, although the tribals were close to the Muslim society and culture, they were not particularly affected by it. Like other communities in the Sundarban region, when they go to cut wood in the forest, collect honey or catch fish and

crabs in the river, they worship and pray to the same deities like Gangadevi, Badar Pir, Banadevi, Dakshinraya, kaluraya etc. Karam Puja is one of the tribal festivals. The use of karam tree is absolutely necessary in this puja, but since there is no karam tree in this region, they have accepted kadam tree for worship. In this way, the tribals have adapted themselves to the environmental conditions and spent their lives. The tribals have been able to adapt their Tusu, Jhumur, Bhadu songs as well as some of the local folk songs of the Sundarbans region, Gajan, various Ballads, Barcalore etc.

Again it can be seen that the women of the Hindu families of this region are accustomed to tribal music and dance. They have vowed to earn money by serving in various places with tribal women.

## Conclusion:

In this way, it can be seen that the coexistence of different communities and ideological harmony has developed in the Sundarban society. Along with that mixed culture flowed. All these social characteristics have given the Sundarbans culture its uniqueness. The people belonging to the tribal society have adapted themselves to the local cultural environment of the region in several ways and have continued their normal life.

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