

## Encapsulating Man-Environment Relationship from the Perspective of Religious Structure: A Study along the Left Bank of River Matla in the Indian Sundarbans, West Bengal

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### Abstract

*Culture of a group is intricately intermingled with economic activities. Such a relation with economy and culture forms a distinctive pattern of social interaction, social relation and even social structure. This phenomenon is very much prominent in the Sundarbans, wherein living along the river side and engagement in fishing activity produce a distinctive form of cultural system. Such cultural system influences social relation as well as social structure of riverine environment. On the contrary, cultural system of the people staying away from the river differs due to practice of agricultural economy. So social relation and social structure of such location would be different from riverine location.*

*In the Sundarbans, people occupy different social positions in terms of – religion, ethnicity, caste etc. For each type of position, there is separate distribution of population, shaping the social structure of the region. Such a diversification develops pluralistic and amalgamated culture of the region; however the amalgamation varies due to position of locales in respect to distance from rivers.*

*The present enquiry has been designed along the left bank of Matla river. This paper aims to differentiate the nature of social interaction and social integration among the different religious groups between the villages located very close to Matla river and away from Matla river. The enquiry also has been made an endeavour to assess the role of riverine environment for shaping the religious structure of the region.*

**Key Words:** Religious structure, social interaction, social integration, riverine environment.

## **Introduction**

Estuarine environment forms the deepest part of sociological aspects of the Sundarbans. It nurtures men, produces their needs, directs their activities and so likely every bit of social life get particular identity due to living with the natural environment. In this ecological setting a distinctive form of culture is expected to be displayed due to specificity of man-environment interaction (Basu, 2010). The whole estuarine environment is fabricated with criss-cross design of rivers, rivulets along with the immense vastness of sea opening. This opportunity provides the basis of economy in the form of fishing activity. However, this opportunity varies with the position of locale. With increasing distance from the sea as well as river, access to the resource base significantly differs. These differences form two separate geographical environments – riverine and non-riverine. Thus, livelihood pattern of man has been reflected with fishing economy along the river side and the so-called agricultural practices away from the river.

There is no denying the fact that earlier researchers confirmed about existence of different socio-cultural region in the Sundarbans (Roychudhury, 1980; Ghoshal, 2006; Pramanik, 2008; Sarkar, 2009). However, they did not focus on the differences in riverine and non-riverine conditions of social space. In a society, people are divided in terms of different social institutions like - religion, ethnicity, caste, class, community, family etc. This division sets barrier of social mixing by which social relation is established (Cummings & Ferraro, 2003). In India, barriers of social mixing are very prominent, especially in rural areas. These barriers are deeply embedded more in religion, ethnicity, caste, and class divisions. Thus, these four pillars construct macro structure of social relation in rural India (Nagla, 2008). On the other hand, from the view point of ecological and regional aspects, people of same soil feel united due to living in the same natural environment (Adger, 2000). This brings relevance of community sentiment of people and subsumes macro structural differences exist in the society (Maciver, 1986). This united factor is operated relatively in smaller units and is significantly different from one region to another (Folke, 2006). Sociologist Randall Collins identified this structure as the chains of interactive rituals and so coined the term 'micro structure' (Turner, 1987).

In a rural system social barrier imposed by macro-structure subsumes united community feeling in general (Muftic, 2009). The objective of the forgoing investigation is to find out

whether the social barrier has over taken the community feeling or community feeling has over shadowed the social barrier due to living in the natural environment.

### **Rationale to the Problem**

Matla river, the most precious gift for the people living close to it, offers means of subsistence in the form of fishing operation that dates back to the historical past. Though, fishing is an age-old caste based activity, but riverine people of any caste get ample opportunities in fishing pursuits all through the time. Recently, the river has been silted rapidly in the northern part in comparison to the south. So, access to fishing resources is easier for the southern part in comparison to the north. Such difference of resource availability may produce intra-variation of social relations and social interactions within riverine settlements.

On the other hand, people at distant location (non-riverine) feel deep sensation towards the river, but they are not occupationally connected with it. They earn their livelihoods from land resources, especially through agricultural occupation. The resource-use of two types population is completely different (Buck, 1989). Fishing pursuits are associated with the use of common property resource that frames social norms, customs and social relations of riverine population. On the contrary, agricultural land is personal property resource and its custody depends on the legacy of feudal structure.

Thus, based on the above discussion two propositions can be formulated. **First**, social structure, social relation and social interaction among the different religious groups may be different from riverine to non-riverine location. **Second**, social relation and social interaction would be different within riverine settlements due to the differential availability of fishing resources.

### **Brief History of Migration and Cultural Mixing**

Social interaction in a pluralistic society cannot be explained unless and until history of cultural ecology of the region has not been unfolded. Such a historical backdrop will certainly point up the hidden clues and information of social dynamics.

During the beginning of British period in India, the Sundarbans was extended much further north than it is at present (Hunter, 1875). The East India Company acquired the civil administration in 1765 and their attention drew on the forest products of the Sundarbans, though the main objective of the land reclamation was the collection of revenue from the unproductive lands and at the same time the reclaimed land was used for agriculture to minimize the problems of food scarcity during the time of famine in Bengal (Mandal & Ghosh, 1989).

The clearing of forest was initiated from the later part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. But the task was not easy as the Sundarbans was the adobe of the fierce mammals and hungry reptiles. Every step of foot was the direct clutch of death. The hard working tribal belong to Munda, Oraon, Santal, Bhumij, Ho etc. (Hunter, 1875) were hired for carrying out the reclamation work. This stock of people had the direct experience with the forest and familiar about the forested surroundings. With their arrival in the new region, reclamation work was started with a higher pace. Due to their sincere workmanship, hard labour and brave attitude to face the various adversities in the dense forest, British Government decided to allot some plots of lands on individual basis at the exchange of their expensive hard labour. During this phase, Uriya people migrated from Cuttack and other parts of Orissa as a salt manufacturer, and also as woodcutters. Since the abolition of the Government salt monopoly, many of those people settled down as cultivators (Chaterjee Sarkar, 2010).

With the progress of reclamation work, the Government initiated to lease the plots and accordingly landless and poor people of the surrounding districts (fig. 1) migrated to the Sundarbans with the hope of changing their fate. However, the rate of migration initially was slow but after 1830s it jerked with momentum and people of different stocks started to migrate here. From the western part, especially from Midnapore and Howrah districts low caste Hindus along with Pods, Mahisya people migrated to stay here, followed by *Namasundras* (lower caste) and Muslims from the Jessore and Khulna districts. Apart from these, people from different sub-castes also settled here. These are – Bagdi, Rajbanshi, Chamar, Dhopa, Jelia, Keora, Kaibarta and Malos (Hunter, 1875). So along with the migration of different people, the region took the shape of complex population pattern. It included low caste Hindus, Muslims and tribal population with some aborigines of remote past (Mandal & Ghosh, 1989). Due to some socio-

political reasons, some low caste Hindus changed their religion to Jainism, Buddhism and Islamic religion in the subsequent course of history (Mandal & Ghosh, 1989). But their occupation was almost remained same as wood cutting, fishing, honey collection and obviously agriculture.

As long as times pass people of the Sundarbans developed their own culture. The newly formed culture was quite relevant for the existing environment and completely different form culture of civilized Aryan or Muslim ones (Mandal & Ghosh, 1989). The tribal people like – Orao, Munda, Santals gradually changed their occupation from so called agriculture to fishing, crab-hunting, honey collection, wood-cutting etc. Being separated from their ancestral land, both physically and spiritually, they adopted this hostile environment and developed a specific philosophy of life designed to fit with the present circumstances (Sarkar, 2009). They started to follow certain rite and worship certain idols such as *Bonobibi* (Goddess of the Forest), *Dakshinrai* (God of the Tiger) etc. regardless of their original caste and creed. On the other side, Muslim people started to worship the same god. Though, worshipping of idol is banned in Muslim culture but they devoted their soul to *Bobobibi*, *Dakshinrai* to protect them from adversities of nature, as usually Hindu people do. This is the place where religion does not separate the people. The life-philosophies of different people have been mingled in to a crystallized society.

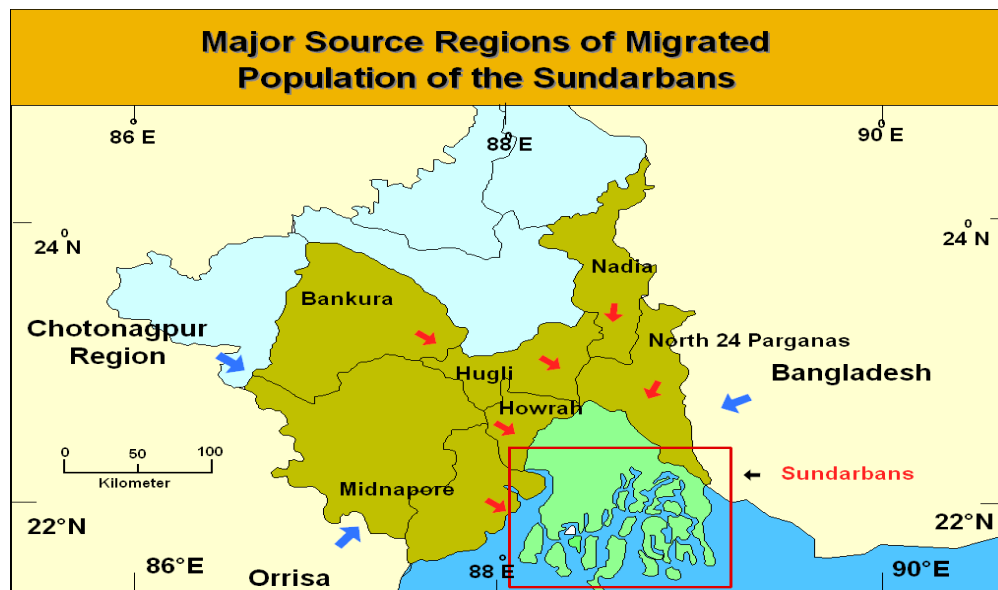


Fig. 1

### **Structure of Religion**

Social structure of the Sundarbans was multi-religious since the earliest period of history with different waves of migration from outside. In the beginning Jain and Buddhism was rooted deeply as a rival of Hinduism. Later on invasion of Muslim rule radically altered political as well as cultural scenario of the Sundarbans (Mitra, 2006). In the British period a section of people were converted into Christianity from Hinduism which once again had modified socio-cultural dynamics of the Sundarbans (Hunter, 1875). So, after the initial set up, religious conflicts occurred between different religious groups; but their eventual compromise for peaceful living casts the unity of religious culture. Hindu, Muslim, Christian people had to face the same natural and biotic hazards. Out of these common fears they are intended to worship the same Gods and Goddesses irrespective of their own religious belief. Present investigation aims to capture the existing relationship and integration between different religious groups in terms of their life and livelihoods in the riverine and the non-riverine environment.

### **Spatial Distribution**

Composition of population in terms of different religions had changed from time to time as well as from one place to another. In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the region recorded existence of three main religions – Hindu (58.84%), Muslim (20.64%) and Christian (5.43%). In Basanti the enumeration is 56.22 %, 41.18 % and 2.50 % respectively (Census, 2001). Here, the left bank of Matla river has taken into consideration for the whole inquiry (Fig. 2). Composition of religious population has been extracted (approximately) through the field visit of each villages and the statistics have been employed in Fig. 3. It is clear that domination of Hindu population is found along the river side villages, though distribution of multi-religious population is found away from the river.

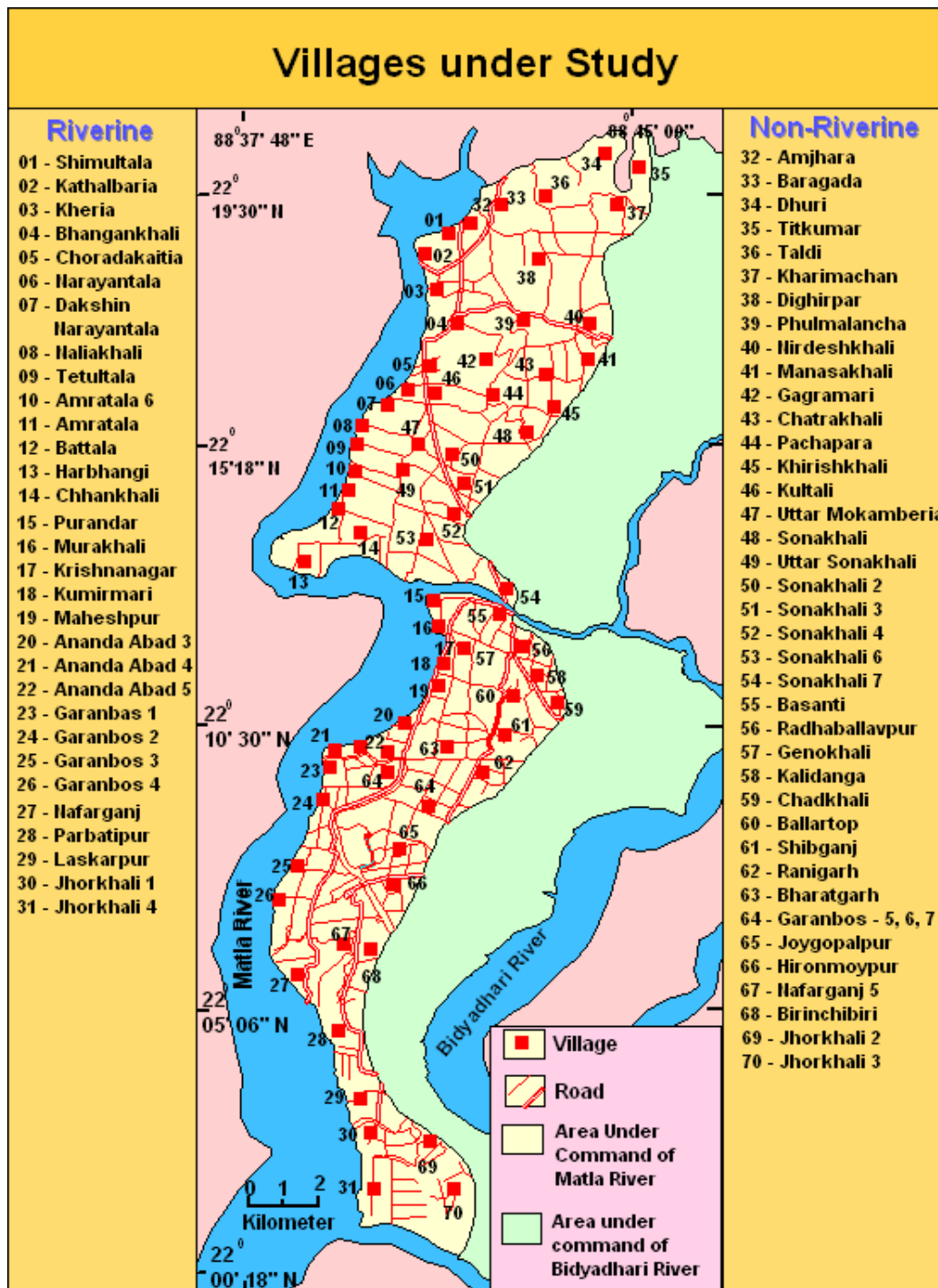


Fig. 2

### Materials and Methods

To measure the strength of relationship among the religious population, villages with multi-religious composition (majority group comprises < 70% of total population) have been taken into consideration. Maximum villages near and far away from the river has been studied to



glean out the general relationship, though altogether thirty two villages have been investigated deeply (marked by black rectangle in Fig. 3), comprising sixteen from the riverine environment and sixteen from the non-riverine. This selection is pertinent as huge samples can dismantle the essence of the inquiry. The selection of the sixteen villages has been done by considering their intra-village distances as well as their multi-religious characteristics. The sample is selected by employing systematic random technique; taking one respondent from five consecutive households. The size of the samples varies from 23 to 51, including both male and female members of different ages (age more than 18 considered) from respective religious groups. Table 1 is framed after the selection of sixteen villages.

**Table 1: Selection of Sample villages for Inter-Religious Relationship**

Type	Village	Sample Size	Sample Amount			Type	Village	Sample Size	Sample Amount		
			H	M	C				H	M	C
Riverine	Kathalberia	33	21	10	2	Non-Riverine	Dhuri	23	13	9	1
	Bhangankhali	47	14	31	2		Dighirpar	29	19	7	3
	Narayantala	31	19	0	12		Nirdeshkhali	35	12	21	2
	Naliakhali	39	14	23	2		Gagramari	29	7	19	3
	Amratala	37	24	11	2		Pachapara	32	21	10	2
	Battala	41	27	12	2		Sonakhali-2	31	9	19	3
	Heobhangi	29	19	8	2		Sonakhali-3	36	11	23	2
	Chharanekhali	25	10	15	0		Sonakhali-6	28	13	10	6
	Purandar	51	35	13	3		Ballartop	24	16	7	1
	Anandaabad-3	37	17	20	0		Shibganj	31	17	12	2
	Garanbose-1	32	18	14	0		Ranigarh	38	20	15	3
	Garanbose-2	29	17	12	0		Bharatgarh	41	16	22	3
	Garanbose-4	31	19	12	0		Hironmoypur	36	18	7	11
	Parbatipur	27	18	7	3		Birinchibiri	28	13	10	6
	Laskarpur	23	14	9	0		Jhorkhali-2	47	31	16	0
	Jhorkhali-4	44	29	15	0		Jhorkhali-3	42	27	15	0

*Note:* 'H' – Hindu, 'M' – Muslim, 'C' – Christian

Along the riverside, the selected villages are investigated regarding inter-religious participation in festivals (P component), knowledge about religion of each other (K component) and nature of bondage (B component). Here, P component indicates social interaction; K component signifies cultural mixing among different religious groups, whereas social integration has been identified by B component. The same line of enquiry has been made in the selected villages which are away from the river. To judge these aspects, rating scale technique has been



adopted with five different points ( $X_5$  to  $X_1$ ) – very good, good, moderate, bad and very bad. For proper quantification, arithmetic scale (5, 4, 3, 2 and 1) has been assigned against this five point scale. Considerable samples have been taken from each village (table 1) and thereafter total score of perception has been obtained by using following formula.

$$\text{Total score of (P)} = (5 \times n_5 + 4 \times n_4 + 3 \times n_3 + 2 \times n_2 + 1 \times n_1) / N$$

Here,  $n_5$ ,  $n_4$ ,  $n_3$ ,  $n_2$  and  $n_1$  indicate the number of opinions for  $X_5$ ,  $X_4$ ,  $X_3$ ,  $X_2$  and  $X_1$  respectively and  $N$  signifies the total number of opinions. The perceived score of P component remains within 5 to 1 with its respective meanings stated here. Same formula has been applied for the calculation of knowledge about religion of each other (K) and nature of bondage (B). Finally, by taking the average of three components (P, K, B) perceived relationship has been derived (table 2). The Tabulated values ranging from 5 to 1 are framed into Fig. 4 to differentiate between riverine (NR) and non-riverine (FR) villages. At the same time, the line graphs (Fig. 5a and 5b) are prepared to exhibit intra-variation of perceived relationship of NR and FR villages from the north to the south direction.

## Result

From the figure (fig. 5.6, 5.7a and 5.7 b) and table 5B, the following results have come out:

**First**, total score of perceived relationship for the villages near to the river side (NR) are higher in respect to far away villages (FR). It prompts that inter-religious relationship is high for NR villages, and it is seemingly low for FR villages. **Second**, for FR villages located in the central part of the study area, near to Bharatgarh, perceived relationship are surprisingly low (Fig. 5b). **Third**, perceived relationship of NR villages is found to increase slowly from the north to the south section (Fig. 5a). **Forth**, the important thing to be noticed here is the negligible difference of perceived relationship between NR and FR villages at the southern end (Fig. 4). **Fifth**, the loadings of three components for NR villages are almost alike (average 4.29, 4.20, 4.40), whereas loading of P and B components are almost identical (average 3.55 and 3.44) for FR villages. However, the response of K component is quite silent and very much different (average

3.11) from the other two. **Sixth**, NR villages show consistency (CV is 5% only) in the score of perceived relationship, but the FR villages are rather inconsistent (CV is 25.33%).

**Table 2: Village-wise Perceived Score of Inter-Religious Relationship**

Type	Village	Component Score			Total	Grade
		P	K	B		
Riverine	Kathalberia	4.06	4.00	4.18	4.08	H
	Bhangankhali	4.15	4.02	4.23	4.13	H
	Narayantala	4.16	3.97	4.10	4.08	H
	Naliakhali	4.08	4.08	4.36	4.17	H
	Amratala	4.03	3.95	4.22	4.06	H
	Battala	4.29	4.20	4.44	4.31	H
	Heobhangi	4.21	4.00	4.07	4.09	H
	Chharanekhali	4.12	4.24	4.20	4.19	H
	Purandar	3.96	3.84	4.50	4.10	H
	Ananda Abad-3	4.76	4.68	4.84	4.76	VH
	Garanbose-1	4.63	4.63	4.56	4.60	VH
	Garanbose-2	4.52	4.45	4.48	4.48	H
	Garanbose-4	4.45	4.42	4.55	4.47	H
	Parbatipur	4.33	4.26	4.63	4.41	H
	Laskarpur	4.52	4.26	4.43	4.41	H
	Jhorkhali-4	4.39	4.27	4.55	4.40	H
<b>Average Score</b>		4.29	4.20	4.40	4.30	
Non-Riverine	Dhuri	3.91	3.70	3.87	3.83	H
	Dighirpar	3.93	3.62	3.62	3.72	H
	Nirdeshkhali	3.66	3.34	3.45	3.48	M
	Gagramari	3.69	2.86	3.28	3.28	M
	Pachapara	3.06	1.81	2.59	2.48	L
	Sonakhali-2	1.45	1.32	1.66	1.48	VL
	Sonakhali-3	2.31	1.58	1.83	1.91	L
	Sonakhali-6	2.43	2.07	2.00	2.17	L
	Ballartop	4.13	3.58	3.79	3.83	H
	Shibganj	3.97	3.61	4.16	3.91	H
	Ranigarh	3.63	3.13	3.84	3.47	M
	Bharatgarh	3.49	2.98	3.80	3.42	M
	Hironmoypur	3.64	3.42	3.89	3.65	H
	Birinchibiri	3.93	3.71	4.29	3.98	H
	Jhorkhali-2	4.13	4.11	4.32	4.18	H
Jhorkhali-3	4.33	4.10	4.21	4.21	H	
<b>Average Score</b>		3.55	3.11	3.44	3.37	

**Note:** **VH** – Very High (> 4.50), **H** – High (from 3.51 to 4.50), **M** – Medium (from 2.51 to 3.50), **L** – Low (from 1.51 to 2.50), **VL** – Very Low (< 1.51 to 1)

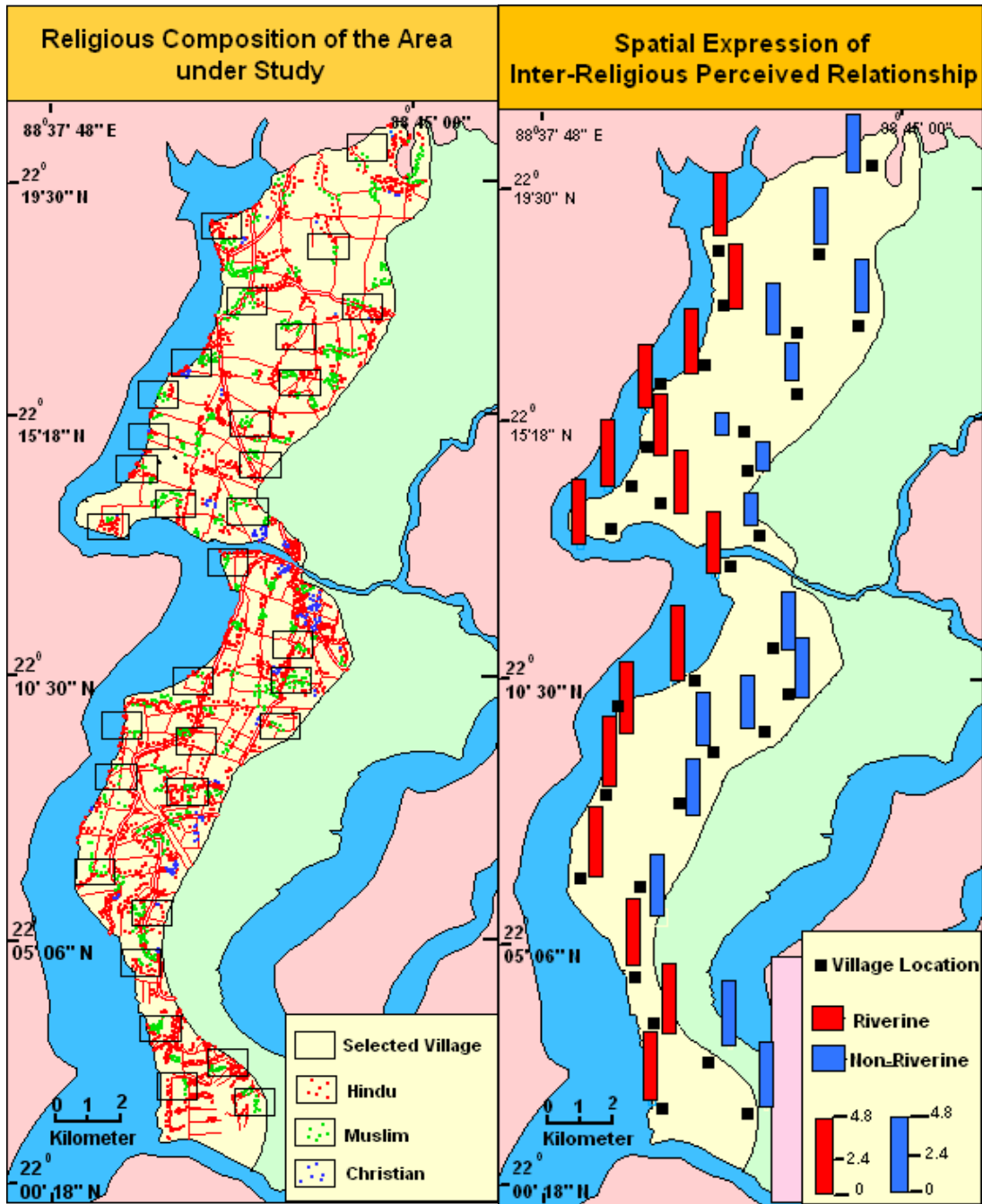


Fig. 3

Fig. 4

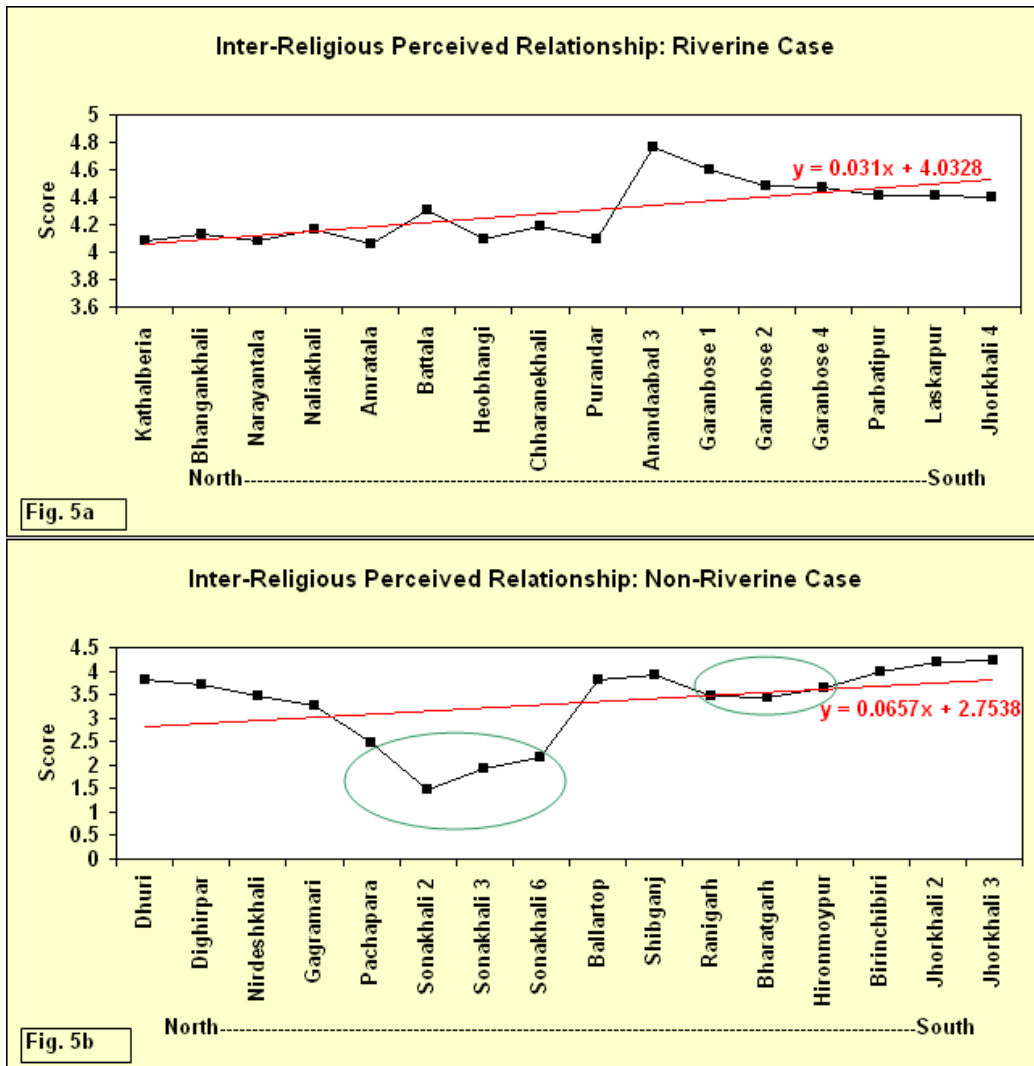


Fig. 5

**Discussion**

The reason behind this scenario can easily be explained. The NR villages experiences constant threat from natural calamities. Almost every two to five years after, agricultural lands and settlement areas are inundated due to storm surges from the Bay of Bengal. Thus, hazard preparedness has already been developed in terms of community help services and embankment construction. This is the common urge for the river-dweller irrespective of their religious identity. Confronting with the frequent inundation these people extend their helpful hand for each other and try to restore socio-economic needs in community life. The re-construction or repairing of breached embankment, draining off the salt water, relief distribution etc. are the

important needs for survival and recovery during crisis. Moreover, providing emotional support to each other leads to form a sense of unity among diversity. Such approaches bind them together in a crystallized form and make resilient in every odds of life. On the other hand, the impact of natural hazards is very infrequent in FR villages due to its distant location from the Matla river. The community over here faces very few cases of devastating hazards throughout their life. In most of the time their houses are damaged due to cyclonic storms. This small-scale damage can easily be recovered by individual operation. Thus, they do not need to form any groups or associations for repairing embankments or any other related necessities. However, they extend their help to the river-dwellers during the occasions of devastating inundation.

The NR villages are commonly involved in fishing activity and this activity is mostly performed on shared basis. It requires collaborative performances to maximize the profit level. The nature of the economy oscillates with the condition of natural environment and thus it needs cooperative attitude to overcome turmoil situation. For such oscillations, the economy enables fisherman to interact frequently and intimately. In contrary to this, FR villages are mainly involved in agricultural practices. Agriculture is considered to be practiced seasonal basis and everyone cultivate their own land separately. Sometimes, small farmers involve themselves as agricultural labourers to earn wages under the regiment of large farmers. Thus, the economic structure is hierarchical and needs little cooperative attitude towards each other. So, very little cohesive force is produced within the people of different religions and subsequently relationship is no more different from that of other parts of rural society. Field inquiry reveals that the Hindus and the Muslims are neglected as well as rejected by each-other in utmost cases. This area is dominated by Muslim population. Such domination enables them to produce cultural hegemony of Islam in the area and subsequently develops conflicting relationship. On the other hand, some NR villages like – Naliakhali, Bhangankhali, Chharanekhali, Anandaabad-3 exhibit social integration and cultural mixing in terms of religion, though these villages hold maximum shares of Muslim population. Thus, along the river side religious structure is unique in character and it is not similar to the popular epidemic culture of India.

In the market area of Bharatgarh total perceived relationship is exceptionally low (below 3.5) in comparison to the surrounding areas. From direct field visit it has been experienced that

the people of different religions here is not so much interested to interact with each other. They did not have any room for other religions in their mind. Even there is no scope for interaction in terms of environmental as well as functional reasons due to distant position of the locality.

It is interesting to note here that the perceived relationship increases towards the south of the study area. Taking a look at Fig. 5a and 5b, it is easier to understand such observations. The riverine villages show a steady increase to the south, though non-riverine villages are relatively inconsistent with kinks and jerks but follow an overall increasing trend. Another important thing has been found here that the differences of perceived relationship between NR and FR villages gradually decrease from the North to the South. The reason behind such observations is the manifestation of increasing of command area of Matla river towards south. From North to the South, volume of Matla river increases (Fig. 2) along with increasing potentiality of available fishing resource as well as probability of hazards. Thus, people towards the south would be more interactive and cohesive in spite of their religious differences. Accordingly, it might have posited feeling in their perceived relationship. On the other hand due to abundant fishing resources towards the south, people from distant localities use to come at river side to catch fishes and tiger seed prawn as it is sustainable for economic gain. This phenomenon is not frequent in the northern part. Therefore, social and cultural mixing is obvious in the southern part due to interaction between NR and FR villages. On the other hand, southern end (Jhorkhali area) faces more hazardous situation which requires more community help and disaster preparedness.

Now it is better to take a glance on the three components of perceived relationship. Necessarily, higher score of component P is more or less common in rural society because neighbourhood relations are maintained by different religious groups. Normally higher score in K component is not found everywhere as norms and customs of one religion may not be familiar to other. If the second one (K) is high, obviously first one would be higher (P). So logically B will definitely score higher value for higher loading in first and second components. Taking a closer inspection about the scores of P, K and B components, it has been detected that all the three components are strong in NR villages. Such observation indicates presence of more social interaction (high value of P) as well as cultural mixing (high value of K) that enable more social integration (high value of B) among the different religious groups of NR villages. The FR

villages on the other hand, show higher loadings mostly in P and B components, but not in K component. It results low value of perceived relationship and inconsistent responses for FR villages. Due to less involvement into the cultural assimilation, inter-religious bond becomes very weak that maps an absence of social interaction and integration.

## **Conclusion**

The sequential discussion relating to macro social structure of NR as well as FR villages clearly signify two notable things. **Firstly**, the analysis begins with the aim of distinction between NR and FR villages in terms of religious division. After analysing field based perceptions and opinions, it has been grounded that there are significant differences that exist between these two types of communities. The barrier of religion is not prominent in separating the people residing close to the river due to their frequent and intimate social interactions. Whereas, people away from the river have deep sense of belongings to each other, but in respect of religion they feel apartness. Relatively feeble social interactions and integration among them may be the reason behind such observation. **Secondly**, moving towards the south the openness as well as widening of Matla river are increased, signifying availability of more water resources at the south. This overwhelming dominance of nature increases social interactions between riverine and non-riverine villages, as well as within the villages; because people either riverine or non-riverine use to share their time, their mind, and cognition with the Matla river and sometimes non-riverine people depend on riverine resources too. Such a positive impression of riverine environment in mental dimension binds the people irrespective of macro-structural differences in the society.

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