



The Sundarbans: An Analytical Study of Ancient History and Early Habitation Connecting the Rivers and Forests

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Abstract: The Ganga–Brahmaputra–Meghna system created the Sundarbans, a sizable mangrove delta that represents both natural diversity and a rich historical heritage. Beyond its current status as a hotspot for biodiversity, its early history depicts a landscape moulded by ongoing human interaction with a changing environment. The area served as a fluctuating boundary of rivers and woodlands in the past. Flexible settlement designs were necessary because to the unstable terrain, tidal floods, and thick vegetation. Early settlers showed a deep awareness of the cycles of nature by adapting through raised dwellings, seasonal migration, and jobs related to the tidal ecology. In the Sundarbans, life was organised by rivers and trees. Forests supplied vital resources like honey, fish, and lumber, while waterways facilitated trade and communication. A culture that saw nature as a collaborator rather than an enemy was developed by this connection. Literary allusions and archaeological evidence imply that the area was a part of larger cultural networks. Local customs and beliefs, which represent a spiritual connection to nature, frequently arose from the necessity to deal with unpredictability in the environment. Our knowledge of this early residence is further enhanced by literary allusions and archaeological discoveries. The presence of towns, trade routes, and spiritual activities entrenched within the mangroves landscape is suggested by ancient literature, local folklore, and travelogues. According to these accounts, the Sundarbans were linked to larger networks of cultural and commercial interchange rather than existing in isolation. Local deities and defensive cults that represented the community's desire to balance with the forces of nature emerged as a result of religious views and ritual practices that frequently mirrored the uncertainties of existence in such a tumultuous environment. The Sundarbans may therefore be viewed as a living environment where natural forces and human resiliency coevolved to create a distinctive pattern of early occupancy and cultural expression.

Keywords: Sundarbans, ancient history, early habitation, Ganges-Brahmaputra Delta, riverine civilization, mangrove forests, environmental history, deltaic ecology, human adaptation, settlement patterns

Introduction

The Sundarbans, which span the southernmost regions of Bangladesh and West Bengal, are much more than just a physical area; they are a dynamic historical process that is continuously changing due to the interaction of human activity and the natural world. In contrast to the more stable and long-lasting inland civilisations that are frequently praised in traditional historiography, the Sundarbans represent a dynamic identity that is constantly altered by tidal



cycles, silt deposition, cyclonic disturbances, and minute climate changes. This constantly shifting terrain challenges static interpretation and encourages us to think of history as an evolving continuum that is characterised by resilience, adaptability, and a continuous conversation between land, water, and life rather than by permanence. It becomes crucial to go beyond the confines of conventional historical methodologies and adopt an interdisciplinary viewpoint that balances geography, ethnography, ecology, and historical context in order to truly connect with the Sundarbans' ancient past. It is important to remember that the apparent lack of massive building or long-lasting archaeological remnants does not imply a lack of historical depth. Instead, it highlights the precarious and fleeting character of human existence in an area where thick mangrove trees gradually recover occupied regions and changing river flows rewrite territorial boundaries. Here, survival patterns, cultural memory, and the faint traces of human adaptation to one of the planet's most intricate and dynamic environments serve as inscriptions of history rather than hard facts.

Review of Literature

The Sundarbans have been extensively researched from an ecological and anthropological standpoint, but its prehistoric past and early settlement have not been well investigated. The majority of the information that is now accessible comes from indirect sources, such as environmental studies, regional histories, and ancient writings. The Ganges-Brahmaputra Delta is described in early geographical descriptions, especially those by Ptolemy, as a bustling commercial hub, indicating the existence of human settlements in nearby areas. Though they haven't focused specifically on the Sundarbans, historians like R. C. Majumdar have emphasised the prosperity of ancient Bengal, showing that deltaic and coastal areas were linked to larger commercial networks. Researchers like Nihar Ranjan Ray highlight how the environment, particularly rivers and topography, shapes patterns of habitation. This viewpoint is essential to comprehending the transient and adaptable character of Sundarbans settlement. According to Dilip K. Chakrabarti, archaeological discoveries from neighbouring locations like Chandraketugarh and Tamluk show a thriving trading network, which obliquely supports the notion of human activity in neighbouring deltaic areas. Human-nature interactions and cultural adaptation in the area are the main topics of environmental and anthropological research, such as those by Mahesh Rangarajan and Annu Jalais. Despite their mostly contemporary perspective, these pieces provide light on long-standing patterns of cohabitation with rivers and woods. Sugata Hazra's geomorphological study also clarifies how direct historical evidence has been concealed by ongoing environmental change.

According to the literature, the Sundarbans' early occupancy was flexible and influenced by environmental factors, even if it was a part of a larger historical and biological system. The current study aims to fill the obvious gap in the integration of historical and ecological viewpoints.

Environmental Change and Geographic Evolution

A protracted and intricate process of geophysical and biological change inside the enormous Ganges-Brahmaputra Delta gave rise to the Sundarbans. Large rivers like the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna transported massive amounts of silt over ages, which were then progressively deposited to create new land. Although these deposits produced islands and lush areas that were conducive to human settlement, the land was never secure. Old communities were often submerged and new ones were born as a result of ongoing erosion and changing river routes. As tidal incursions increased salt over time, freshwater zones became brackish,



making agriculture more challenging and forcing populations to adapt. At the same time, mangrove vegetation expanded over the area, transforming once open areas into thick woods. Thus, the Sundarbans evolved as a fluid and ever-changing ecological system where land, water, and forest remained in constant dialogue.

Historical Imagination and Ancient Literary Allusions

Even while the Sundarbans aren't usually mentioned specifically in early writings, their existence may be inferred from allusions to nearby areas in ancient Indian literature, such as Vanga and Samatata. These allusions imply that the wider deltaic zone was renowned for its strategic significance and fertility. The Gangetic delta was far from isolated, as noted by classical geographers like Ptolemy, who portrayed it as a prosperous region linked to global trade networks. Forested and riverine landscapes were depicted in various literary traditions as transitional areas, existing between civilised society and wild nature. Such a mental space was probably inhabited by the Sundarbans, which served as both a bridge and a boundary. In addition to representing the unpredictability's and mysteries of nature, it linked coastal routes with interior cultural centres. Even if they are indirect, these literary glances enable us to envision the region's historical significance beyond the boundaries of tangible proof.

Context of Archaeology and Indirect Proof of Habitation

The Sundarbans' unstable topography and thick jungle have made direct archaeological research very difficult. Nonetheless, neighbouring locations like Tamluk and Chandraketugarh offer insightful information about the larger cultural environment. These locations demonstrate the presence of advanced urban centres with vibrant creative traditions, commercial networks, and a variety of cultural influences. Coins, ceramics, and terracotta sculptures are examples of artefacts that show economic success and ties to far-off places like the Mediterranean and Southeast Asia. Even though the Sundarbans' villages were smaller and less permanent, it is quite likely that they were included into this larger network given their geographic closeness.

Rivers as Vibrant Early Life Arteries

Rivers were more than just natural elements in the Sundarbans; they were essential to human survival. In an area where land roads were frequently unfeasible, they functioned as natural highways, facilitating mobility and communication. Boats took over as the main mode of transportation, influencing daily life and promoting trade and cross-cultural interaction. Additionally, rivers supplied a wealth of resources that supported subsistence activities like fishing and water-based agriculture. However, they were also erratic and frequently devastating, resulting in erosion and floods that might destroy entire communities. Due to rivers' dual role as givers and destroyers, people had to create adaptable and flexible lifestyles.

Forests as Resource, Risk, and Respect Zones

The Sundarbans' mangrove forests were equally important in forming human existence. These woods, which were rich in biodiversity, offered vital commodities that supported both commerce and sustenance, including wood, honey, wax, and medicinal plants. They did, however, also provide difficult obstacles. The jungle was always perilous due to the thick foliage and the presence of deadly animals like Bengal tigers. Early dwellers depended on collective knowledge passed down through the generations and developed a profound awareness of natural patterns to manage this environment. Spiritual and cultural rituals arose



as a way to deal with risk and uncertainty. A moral and spiritual connection with the forest was symbolised by the worship of regional deities like Bonbibi, who emphasised tolerance, moderation, and respect. In this sense, the forest had a significant impact on cultural identity in addition to serving as a source of income.

Settlement Patterns: Adaptability and Flexibility

The necessity to adapt to a continually changing environment has a fundamental impact on human settlement in the Sundarbans. Here, communities were frequently transient and adaptable, in contrast to the permanent urban centres of other ancient civilisations. Communities settled on freshly created land, utilising its resources and fertility, but they were always ready to go when things became bad. Local resources were used in the construction of the houses, making restoration following storms or floods simple. Social organization placed a strong emphasis on teamwork and assistance, especially during difficult times. This adaptable settlement pattern illustrates a special kind of resilience in which survival relied on coexisting peacefully with nature rather than trying to control it. Living in the Sundarbans became characterised by this flexibility.

Decline and Transformation of Early Habitation

Early Sundarbans settlements declined or changed over time due to a number of environmental and climatic causes. River route changes caused soil erosion, and rising salinity reduced the viability of agriculture. Communities were forced to evacuate their houses due to extensive damage caused by frequent storms and tidal surges. Mangrove trees eventually regained the land as human activity declined, transforming formerly populated regions into thick wildness. Only small, dispersed villages remained in the area by the Middle Ages, when much of it had become poorly inhabited. This fall was gradual rather than sudden, demonstrating the centuries-long cumulative effects of environmental stresses. Subsequent attempts to retake and colonise the area would usher in a new era in the history of the area.

An analytical viewpoint on how rivers, forests, and human life are interdependent

A thorough examination of the Sundarbans reveals a highly interwoven system in which human groups, rivers, and trees all have a significant impact on one another. Although the environment presented opportunity for creativity and adaptability, it also imposed some limitations, such as risk and instability. Instead of dominating nature, human agency was demonstrated via resilience and cohabitation tactics. The history of the area is defined by cycles of settlement, abandonment, and regeneration rather than a straight line of progress. In reaction to natural circumstances, cultural practices, economic endeavours, and social structures all changed, resulting in a unique kind of civilisation that was both delicate and resilient. This interconnectedness emphasises how crucial it is to approach history from an environmental perspective, especially in areas where nature predominates.

Methodology

A qualitative, multidisciplinary method is used in this Sundarbans investigation. It mostly depends on secondary sources and analytical interpretation because there is little first-hand proof. In order to gain an indirect understanding of early settlement, a historical-analytical approach is used to literary texts, such as Ptolemy's allusions to the Ganges-Brahmaputra Delta. The effects of river systems, such as the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna rivers, on settlement patterns are examined from an environmental standpoint.



In order to determine the socioeconomic circumstances of the area, the research also employs comparative examination of neighbouring archaeological sites like Chandraketugarh and Tamluk. In order to comprehend human adaptation to forest and river ecosystems, an interpretive method also makes use of anthropological research. In order to describe the dynamic character of early settlement in the Sundarbans, the technique is often analytical and integrative, integrating historical, environmental, and cultural viewpoints.

Research Gap

There is still a conspicuous dearth of concentrated study on the Sundarbans' ancient history and early occupancy, despite substantial studies on the region's ecosystem and current socioeconomic problems. The Sundarbans are not explicitly mentioned as a separate historical area in most historical books, which instead focus on larger areas like the Ganges-Brahmaputra Delta.

The majority of the material now in publication relies on indirect evidence from neighbouring sites like Chandraketugarh and Tamluk, leaving the inner Sundarbans with little archaeological research. Additionally, there is a lack of connection between environmental history and conventional historical study, which leaves the impact of rivers and forests on early human settlement incompletely understood. Therefore, this research aims to fill a major gap in the development of a thorough, multidisciplinary study that links ecological shifts with early settlement patterns in the Sundarbans.

Research Questions

The present study on the Sundarbans is guided by the following key research questions:

1. How did the environmental dynamics of the Ganges-Brahmaputra Delta influence early human habitation in the Sundarbans?
2. What evidence from literary sources and historical accounts (such as those of Ptolemy) can be used to reconstruct the ancient history of the region?
3. To what extent do archaeological findings from nearby sites like Chandraketugarh and Tamluk help in understanding early settlement patterns in the Sundarbans?
4. How did the interaction between river systems and mangrove forests shape the livelihood, mobility, and cultural practices of early inhabitants?
5. Why were settlements in the Sundarbans largely temporary and adaptive rather than permanent and urbanized?

Conclusion

This study reveals the Sundarbans as an environmentally delicate and historically dynamic area where human existence has continuously interacted with the natural world. The Ganges-Brahmaputra Delta's constantly shifting terrain encouraged flexible and adaptable types of habitation influenced by rivers, tides, and woods rather than rigid or permanent forms of settlement. The research shows that early human presence may be understood through literary allusions, adjacent excavation sites, and environmental patterns, even if it is not always evident through direct archaeological remains. Mangrove forests offered both resources and difficulties, while rivers served as lifelines that allowed for communication, mobility, and nourishment. A special socio-ecological system where survival required constant adaptation to shifting circumstances was produced by these two influences. The research also emphasises the Sundarbans as an alternative form of civilisation, characterised by ecological harmony, resilience, and mobility rather than urban permanency. Settlements' transient and dynamic character indicates a profound awareness of environmental constraints and opportunities.



In summary, the Sundarbans' historical past provides important lessons for sustainable living in delicate ecosystems. It emphasises how crucial it is to incorporate environmental viewpoints into historical study and serves as a reminder that human flexibility and harmony with nature have always been necessary for survival in changing environments.

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