

Privatization along the Ganga: A Case of Boatmen community of Varanasi

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When there is a lot of pressure on natural resources or controversies erupt over ownership then the biggest impact comes on those who have been living their lives with the help of these natural resources. Since many of the local communities living alongside the banks of an environmental and cultural common like The River Ganga; have been traditionally depended upon the river for their livelihood needs to be fulfilled. This in turn has led to the development of a symbiotic relationship between these communities and the river, leading to the formation of river economy that has taken shape over centuries. But in the era of LPG (Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation) the state through its various policies centred around the river Ganga has chiefly looked at the river as commodities in contrast to it being a common property resource which has been the way how these communities have looked at the river. This also reminds me of a phrase used in local language which distinguishes between “Maai” (mother) and “Kamaai” (income generation). Wherein the political class has labelled the river often as “maai” or as someone to be taken care off, but in reality eyeing its resources and doing “kamaai” of it by commodifying it.

Recently the struggle of the boatmen community (boatmen community) in Benares proves this point. The Namami Gange policy, brought by the Modi Government which was created to ensure the inevitability of the Ganges which could not prove to be fully effective on the ground, has now started to appear the opposite result. It is imperative to state that since the 1980s, all the policies that have been made on Ganga cleanliness have been funded by only donor agency, i.e., the World Bank. As far as the funding of the World Bank is concerned, many experts believe that the World Bank has so far not succeeded anywhere in the world, as it has taken the initiative to revive the rivers of the whole world. Whether it was the Ganga Action Plan created by the then Rajiv Gandhi government in 1985-86 or the second major government plan created

to revive Ganga in the name of Ganga River Basin Authority in UPA 2 or after the coming of Modi Government, a new policy Namami Gange has been launched, all these schemes were assisted by the world bank. Why is the world bank so much interested in this project? Experts say that the first reason is that it is easy to get a to lend. Apart from funding it is also providing technical support for the same, as it is involved in such type of assignment of river rejuvenation across the world (Argentina, Brazil, China etc.). But assistance of world bank has been never remained out of the purview of examination esp. by the academicians, researchers and activists of all walks of life. As Himanshu Thakkar points out that;

The World Bank track record in rejuvenating rivers across the world is almost nil. They have never been able to rejuvenate any river. The World Bank has always been funding Indian projects.... but these are loans with interest. India is a good customer for the World Bank.....the dynamics of World Bank funding has a political nature.¹

Another important reason gives by the 'Water Man of India' Mr Rajendra Singh, that, "the World Bank has been able to implement its policies here, in other words, World Bank want to privatize Water and rivers of the country". Now the question is, how will these policies affect the people whose lives are sustained on these natural resources. The protest against the policies is seen from the time when the first policy was implemented in the 1980s as the Ganga Action Plan.

The boatmen of Benares who had been working for ferrying the boats in the Ganges for centuries and whose lives were fully settled on this holy river, they gradually became victims of this government policy. The Boatmen community is a traditional riverine community, whose members operate boats on the Ganga from the *Ghats* (a set of stairs leading to a river); a customary practice, which has been running since centuries. There are in total 84 *Ghats* in Varanasi located along the western bank of the river Ganga spanning over six kilometers. As per their customary laws each *ghat* gets assigned to a particular family hailing from amongst the boatmen community of the area and nobody, other than the specific family assigned to the *ghat*, can transgress this customary right of operating boat from their respective *ghats*. For e.g.

¹ *Ganga clean up more about governance than technology: Himanshu Thakkar*. Accessed on March 29, 2018
<https://www.thenewsminute.com/technologies/71>

If a boatman operates from the northernmost ghat of the Ganga i.e. Assi ghat, they tend to easily get tourists for boating; since Assi ghat has a strategically well placed location. Generally, people who come to visit the Ganga in Varanasi have an easy access to this place by road. And this strategic location advantage is what boatmen from other *ghats* such as Dashashwamedha ghat, Rajendra Prasad ghat, etc. too share alongside the Assi ghat. Thus a natural class division tends to get created in the local riverine economy of the region wherein boatmen from these respective *ghats* tend to get decent money thanks to good frequency of tourists on their ghats.

There is a peculiar case of inequality among the boatmen community. This is the result of their inherited or customary rights over the space near the Ganga. Since whose forefathers used to operate their boat on a particular ghat, that space becomes to that family. This oral tradition or customary practices divided boatmen community in two categories; first *Ghatwars*, who have the right to operate their boat from a particular ghat. Second, *Mallahis*, those who do not inherit this exclusive right. Generally, Mallahis operate boat over the Ganga on contractual basis with the Ghatwars in most of the cases. So, there is a clear class division among the boatmen community. The Mallahis largely depend on the kindness of Ghatwars for their daily earnings.

A few months ago, the boatmen community went unto untimely fasting, against these policies. They believe that privatization is being imposed on the name of 'Namami Gange'. There are 84 ghats in Varanasi, which are located in link form of about 6 km. The families of the boatmen community are associated with their specific ghats to run their customary business (boat operations), the community considers itself as Ganga's son. This business has been running for a long time according to the customary rules made by its community. The expansion of these customary practices of the boatmen community of Benares can be found in the ethnographic description by the Australian researchers. This community does not only earn its livelihood from the Ganges but also be able to discharge the duty of keeping Ganga as its 'Mother', keeping it pollution and dirt free. During my research, I found that this community tries to ensure that there is no mess in river Ganga. As the community consider the work as not their customary space but as mother-child relation. The Nobel Prize winner Elinor Ostrom in 2009,

in her thesis², mentioned that if we want to protect the natural resources, then the ownership of that natural resources should be given to those communities who have been able to save it and use its wisdom for centuries. But the irony is that whatever government policies have been made in our country, it has always been imposed directly, rather being discussed with the communities there. The boatmen community of Benares has also been subjected to similar governmental policies and has consistently raised its voice against it. Benares is the parliamentary seat of Prime minister Modi, a massive rise in tourism is seen. In the same sequence, the boat riding on the Ganges is now noticed by big businessmen.

In Benares, the luxury boats, such as the 'Alaknanda Cruise' and the 'Jalpari' are operating directly on the earnings of the boatmen community. Earlier to it, the strange order of moving the solar-powered e boat was also issued by the prime minister. The boatmen community protested against the failure of the E-boat and the impracticality. whether it was the Tortoise Sanctuary on the other side of the Ganga, issued by the Varanasi Municipal Corporation, or issuing of rules and guidelines, all this indicates the knock of privatization so that the age-old traditional business of the boatmen community can be directly threatened. We must remember that privatization always leaves the door behind the facade of inability. Varanasi municipal corporation also did not renew the license of the boat by pointing to the boatmen community with many inefficiencies. Consequently, this community has raised voice against the anti-conflicting policies from time to time. Even in February 2017, this community had to stop boat operation on 84 ghats across the country for protesting against the making of jetties on the Dashashvmedh ghat and Assi ghat by the municipal corporation. Currently, the local administration of Varanasi (Varanasi Municipal Corporation) and U.P. government have accepted some demand as the boatmen community due to the almost 10-day strike against the stagnation of the river economy of Varanasi. It is also an indication that administration is kneeling in for the demands, this too portrays the important role of the community, and this community can play an important role in the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections according to the electoral arithmetic.

² In her magisterial book *Governing the Commons*, Ostrom came out with this thesis. Ostrom, Elinor. *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*: Cambridge University Press, New York, 1990.

The boatmen community of Benares is a part of Nishad community, which is an important part of the other backward classes in the population of Uttar Pradesh. In the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, the community gave its full support to the BJP. But the community went away from the BJP about their problems of their livelihood and form a new party in 2017, the new party was born as Nishad party. Nishad community includes Kewat, Bind, Mallah, Manjhi etc, which are kept in the OBC category. This caste community has been proving to be crucial because of its strength in particular in some parliamentary constituencies of Eastern Uttar Pradesh like Gorakhpur, Varanasi Mirzapur etc. If the matter speaks of the prime minister's parliamentary constituency, Varanasi, then in two of the 5 assembly constituencies, the boatmen community in Varanasi Cantt and Varanasi south plays a decisive role. Although this community has been loyal to BJP but witnessing threat on their livelihood; during above mentioned agitation they even have begun to say that the next election is going to be between the 'Real Ganga son' (referring to themselves) and the 'Fake Ganga son' (referring to PM Modi).

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