

Tracing the Past in the Present: A study of boats

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Rivers play a crucial role in the development of world civilization and connect cultures and thoughts. The vast course of the river Ganga along with other major rivers in the Bengal delta have determined the culture, belief system and philosophical thoughts of the region for millennia. The religious practices seen today are largely due to the belief in the sacredness of rivers. In this photo-essay, I have attempted to capture the building techniques of boats along with the different styles in their natural environment – in or around water bodies, and capture some of the cultural practices that are shaped by the making and presence of this object – the boat.



Figure 1: Living Tradition. Traditional boat makers use bamboo grove as the ideal place for boat making. Shed of the bamboo grove is preferred as the climate in this part of the world is hot and humid. Not only that, bamboo is also an important tool of boat making. Balagarh in Hugli district is a commercial boat building centre of Bengal where Rajbansi boat makers (a fishing caste of Bengal) are the boat makers who build boats throughout the year and keep it in their boat building shed for sale.

The flow of perennial river has its own rhythm which is affected by seasonal changes, high and low tide. The sun, moon, and the planets, while revolving, influence regularly the flow of rivers and we experience high tide of various magnitude. Bhatiyali, the typical tune and the singing style which is widely spread throughout Bengal, is much in accordance with the flow of rivers.

“Ujaan gange nao bhasailam.....” the song can be translated as follows...

I am sailing upstream in my boat

With an undefined illusion

My boat full of blemishes-

I moored on that bank

In the name of you amidst the ocean

I hoisted the mast high

Hoping for the land

I moored on that bank

My Lord, Oh! My Lord

My Lord, Oh! My Lord

I was unconscious in a trance

Was in deep sleep

While I had time I could not

Build an actual boat on land.



Figure 2: Little tradition still in continuation. Oldest form of watertight compartment made after hollowing of a single trunk of Palmyra Palm called taler donga. Place of documentation Ghatal, Hugli district.



Figure 3: Traditional way of shoring. Coastal method of anchoring.

Now I find the mast worn out
 Eaten up by the termites
 Know not how to erect the mast
 And steer my boat to this bank
 My Lord, Oh! My Lord
 My Lord, Oh! My Lord

The day glide into night,
 The darkness woke me up
 Wishing for the dawn, lonely
 Worthless me kept awoke

Almighty if you want my life

Takeaway this boat
 Without your help Oh! Lord
 I cannot reach the land
 My Lord, Oh! My Lord
 My Lord, Oh! My Lord

Translated by the author, 2021



Figure 4 : Shalti, a traditional wooden boat of Lower Gangetic Plain. Long and narrow boats are used to carry all kinds of goods through narrow channels of the Sundarbans. Method of propulsion is punting.



Figure 5 : Mahajoni Nouka, supplier of goods through waterways. Carrying capacity ranges from 1000 to 2000 mounds. Shell built, stapled and rivetted boat propelled by oar and square sail.



Figure 6 : Sultani, a skeleton build boat of Medinipur district propelled by lug sail. Due to incorporation of engine, sailing boats are now without any mast. A boat popularly known as medinipuri boat.

This was Bhatiyali: song of the river, sung by the river through her boatmen. Bhatiyali is sung solo, with little or no instruments, occasionally a stringed dotara – a musical instrument strung with two wires is used. River has sculpted the very structure of the Bhatiyali. The sound of the water brings in a lilting unevenness in the structure of Bhatiyali. The bare nature and the very expanse of the river facing the boatman brings out existential anguishes in him. Bhatiyali often tends to merge with dehatattwa – a genre of music that dwells on the philosophy of the body. In these, the river is used as a metaphor for life itself. The lyrics of Bhatiyali tell us about the lone journey of the boatman down the vast, never ending river. The songs have a strange character. Because they are born on a living river with all her moods, they are not always full of praise for the river, unlike classical shlokas or paeans. They are honest and real. They talk of the drudgery of the journey, the treacherous river and its storms and floods. The metaphor of river and search for direction, kinara/kul, is interminable.

“I cried my heart out, by the river of the mundane
 Who is there to help you cross over, o my mind.
 I spent my good days
 And now I have come to the river
 O boatman, I do not know your name
 Who would I call?
 I do not know your name..”

(O majhi to naam jaani na... is a song in Meghe Dhara Tara directed by Ritwik Ghatak)

These songs, and many others added to the list have a few things in common: rivers, definitely, but something more. A serenity, a plaint, a contemplation. No chorus can mar the beauty of this lonely quest down the river. The notes are muted, starting with initial high notes, descending and meandering into low notes where the songs are based.

Nobel laureate, Rabindranath Tagore, introduced new prose and verse forms and the use of colloquial language into Bengali literature, freeing it from traditional models based on classical Sanskrit. In 1891, Tagore went to East Bengal (now Bangladesh) to manage his family's estates at Shilaidaha and Shazadpur for 10 years. There he often stayed in his own boat named Padma on the Padma River. Between 1890 and 1891, Tagore stayed on this boat received guests like Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose, Sister Nivedita, Lokendranath Palit, and Surendranath Tagore. It was a prolific period of his life when he wrote most of the stories of Galpo Guchho and numerous poems, including Sonar Tari. Sitting at his desk on the Padma, he wrote essays, letters, and edited journals. It was here that Tagore began his English translation of Gitanjali and even Malini was written during his time spent here.

Tagore used boat in his various lyrics where he depicted it in different emotional forms- sometimes it meant the process of ongoing life, sometimes the simple rhythm of walking and in other times boat meant beauty, sheer passion, dream and internal conjugation.



Figure 7 : Lost tradition. Khorokisti, a straw carrier used to carry straw from Sundarbans to Kolkata. Last visible in the year 2009.



Figure 8 : Gangadhar Pattayit, 69 (Head Mistiri) chief boat maker of Kasafal region, Odisha. He acquired craftsmanship from his guru (teacher) and has taught the skill to 20 disciple (sishyo). The boat he is repairing was made by his guru 30 years ago. Quality of wood, craftsmanship and maintenance are the key factors for the life of a boat.

In the following song, Tagore has used boat as the passage of life to oblivion. The song carries the meaning of a simple yet satisfactory life in the midst of the beautiful and bountiful nature but Tagore has opted to leave them behind and take the chance of facing the unknown threats of life.

‘Haoya lage ganer paale
Majhi amar bosho hale
Ebar chhara pele banche
Jibantori dheuye nachhe
Ei bataser tale tale.’

Breeze is touching the mast of song
My steerer sit on the rudder
Now with the start the
Boat of life will wake up to life

While dancing on the waves with the rhythm of the wind

The oceans are fed by various streams and rivers that are either perennial or non-perennial, small or mighty. From time immemorial, people have taken to water for a number of reasons like - to survive, to explore, to travel, to trade, to fish, to fight and for fun. For thousands of years, they have been developing new ways to make their acquaintance with water easier, safer and quicker. The earliest crafts used by ancient man were simple rafts and floats. Then the hollow shell, which sat on the water, was invented and initially it was probably a simple hollowed log. This is the boat in its earliest form which is an invention as important as the wheel. The wooden boats, a little modified form of the former, that are still used all over the world, are the ancestors of the great sailing ships and the huge ferries and container ships of today.

The most important source of information other than major finds of ancient boat is that provided by boats of the ancient building traditions, which still exist today. A study of present day boats gives us a clue of the rich maritime and riverine culture and technology of this part of the world. Orthodox traditional society still maintains their material culture which can be studied to reconstruct the past.



Figure 9 : Sambhu Barik, 72, a traditional boat maker of Balagarh, Hugli district, West Bengal. Balir Nouko (specifically made to carry sand from river bed) is one of the popular boat of Balagarh. Length varies from 30 to 50 feet.



Figure 10 : Repairing of boat takes place after dry docking. Indigenous method of dry-docking where after anchoring to a relatively high land of the bank at the time of high tide and then removing a portion of the clay where it is anchored. Not only boat makers but also family members of boat owners use to take part in the entire process of boat building.



Figure 11 : Temporary shed of boat repairing. Sari sails are the common materials for making temporary shed to repair boats.



Figure 14 : More elaborate engravings and adornment of the boat of Patia, a coastal fishing boat of Odisha. Note the presence of sari.



Figure 12 : Young people are also engaged with boat building in Ichhamati river, Basirhat, North 24 Parganas. Malaysian Teak and other imported woods are widely used due to availability and low price.



Figure 15 : Peacock headed boat, popularly known as Mayurpankhee, a pleasure boat of Bengal widely popularized boat as a symbol of status. Terracotta plaque from Charbangla Temple, Baranagar, Azimganj, Murshidabad. Year of establishment 1755.



Figure 13 : Boat, a living entity. Boat users paint eyes on the head of the boat.

Along with the text, photographs and translations are by the author.