

Biodiversity of zooplankton at Gorai Beach, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India

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Abstract

Zooplankton are critical intermediaries in marine food webs, transferring energy from phytoplankton to higher trophic levels and serving as sensitive bioindicators of water quality and ecosystem health. Gorai Creek and its adjacent beach, located in the northwestern suburban region of Mumbai, Maharashtra, India, represent a transitional coastal ecosystem characterized by extensive mangrove mudflats, tidal flushing, and significant anthropogenic pressures from India's most populous metropolis. Despite the ecological significance of this system, comprehensive seasonal data on zooplankton biodiversity at Gorai Beach remain sparse and fragmentary.

Objective: This study aimed to systematically document the biodiversity, seasonal abundance patterns, and community structure of zooplankton at Gorai Beach, Mumbai, while evaluating the influence of key environmental parameters (temperature, salinity, dissolved oxygen, pH, nutrients, and chlorophyll-a) on zooplankton assemblages.

Methods: Monthly sampling was conducted over a 12-month period (covering monsoon, post-monsoon, and pre-monsoon seasons) at three stations along Gorai Beach and the adjacent creek mouth. Zooplankton were collected using a standard plankton net (mesh size 100–200 μm) via horizontal and vertical tows. Quantitative and qualitative analyses will include taxonomic identification to the lowest practicable taxon, density estimation (individuals m^{-3}), biomass determination, and calculation of diversity indices (Shannon-Wiener H' , Margalef D , Pielou's evenness J'). Environmental parameters were measured simultaneously using standard oceanographic and analytical methods. Multivariate statistical techniques (cluster analysis, nMDS, Canonical Correspondence Analysis) were applied to elucidate relationships between zooplankton community structure and environmental variables.

Results: During the present research, a diverse zooplankton assemblage dominated by Copepods, with significant seasonal shifts in community composition driven primarily by monsoon-induced salinity fluctuations was documented. Copepod diversity was peak during the post-monsoon period (October–January), consistent with patterns observed in the nearshore

waters off Mumbai by earlier researchers. Monsoon months exhibited reduced density and diversity, may be due to high turbidity and lowered salinity. Anthropogenic stressors (domestic sewage, industrial effluents, and petroleum hydrocarbon inputs) might have exerted measurable influence on community structure.

Significance: This study provides the first comprehensive seasonal baseline of zooplankton biodiversity at Gorai Beach, contributing to the ecological knowledge of Mumbai's coastal zone and establishing a foundation for long-term monitoring and conservation planning in this ecologically sensitive and anthropogenically stressed region.

Keywords: Zooplankton biodiversity; Gorai Beach; Mumbai coast; Seasonal variation; Copepoda; Bioindicators; Water quality; Coastal ecology; Arabian Sea

1. Introduction

1.1 Ecological Significance of Zooplankton in Marine Ecosystems

Zooplankton occupy a pivotal position in marine pelagic food webs, functioning as the primary consumers of phytoplankton and microbial production and as prey for higher trophic levels including fish larvae, planktivorous fish, cephalopods, and marine mammals. Beyond their trophic role, zooplankton contribute significantly to biogeochemical cycling through grazing, respiration, excretion, and vertical migration, facilitating the transfer of carbon, nitrogen, and phosphorus between surface and deep waters. Among crustacean zooplankton, copepods (orders Calanoida, Cyclopoida, and Harpacticoida) are numerically dominant in most marine systems and serve as essential links between primary production and fishery yields.

Zooplankton communities exhibit rapid responses to environmental perturbations due to their short generation times, high metabolic rates, and sensitivity to physicochemical gradients. This responsiveness has established zooplankton as valuable bioindicators of water quality, eutrophication status, and anthropogenic stress in aquatic ecosystems. The composition, diversity, and abundance patterns of zooplankton assemblages integrate environmental conditions over time, making them effective tools for monitoring ecosystem health.

1.2 Coastal Ecosystems of Mumbai: Ecological Context and Anthropogenic Pressures

Mumbai, situated on India's central west coast along the Arabian Sea, is India's most populous city and a major industrial, commercial, and maritime hub. The city's coastline is characterized by a complex network of creeks, estuaries, mudflats, as well as rocky and sandy beaches that support rich but increasingly threatened marine biodiversity. The nearshore waters off Mumbai sustain a diverse zooplankton fauna, with continuous observations documenting biomass variations from 0.4 to 19.9 mg C m⁻³ (average 4.3 mg C m⁻³) and zooplankton production peaks during the post-monsoon period following monsoon-driven phytoplankton blooms.

However, Mumbai's coastal waters receive substantial anthropogenic inputs through major influxes from Bassein Creek, Manori Creek, Versova Creek, Mahim Creek, Vashi Creek, and Dharamtar Creek. These inputs include domestic sewage, industrial effluents (from fertilizer, automobile, petroleum, leather, food, chemical, and nuclear industries), and agricultural runoff. The resulting water quality degradation has documented effects on zooplankton communities, with reduced diversity and altered species composition in polluted versus relatively clean coastal waters.

1.3 Gorai Beach and Gorai Creek: A Neglected Study System

Gorai Creek, which transects the northwestern portion of suburban Mumbai, extends approximately 12 km inland through vast mangrove mudflats and low-lying marshy areas. The shallow creek is strongly influenced by semidiurnal tides with spring and neap ranges of 3.5 m and 1.8 m respectively at the mouth, inducing effective tidal flushing of the lower reaches. Sediments in the creek consist predominantly of silt (41.6–96%) and clay (4.9–57.3%) with low sand content (1–8%), and organic carbon content ranging from 1.4 to 2.5%.

Despite the ecological importance of this transitional system, zooplankton biodiversity data specific to Gorai Beach and its adjacent creek mouth are remarkably limited. A recent faunal diversity assessment of Gorai Creek (August 2010–July 2014) documented 90 species across 70 genera, 50 families, 29 orders, 6 classes, and 3 phyla, but this study focused primarily on macrofauna (fish, molluscs, crustaceans, and birds) with limited emphasis on zooplankton. Separate investigations have reported total zooplankton densities ranging from 500 to 254,400 individuals m^{-3} (average 127,450 individuals m^{-3}) at Gorai Creek stations, with minimum densities recorded during February and October. However, these data remain unpublished in the peer-reviewed literature, and comprehensive seasonal analyses of zooplankton community structure, diversity indices, and environmental relationships for Gorai Beach specifically are conspicuously absent.

1.4 Research Gap and Rationale

The absence of systematic zooplankton biodiversity data for Gorai Beach represents a significant knowledge gap for several reasons. First, Gorai Beach and Creek serve as critical nursery grounds for penaeid prawns (including *Penaeus indicus* and *Metapenaeus* species) and other commercially important crustaceans, whose larval stages depend on zooplankton prey. Second, the creek receives pollutant loads from surrounding urban and industrial areas, yet the biological responses of zooplankton communities to these stressors remain unquantified. Third, the anthropogenic activities in the region pose emerging threats that require baseline ecological data for impact assessment and mitigation planning.

This study has filled this gap by conducting a comprehensive seasonal assessment of zooplankton biodiversity at Gorai Beach, integrating taxonomic, ecological, and environmental data to establish a robust baseline for future monitoring and conservation efforts.

2. Definitions

Zooplankton: Heterotrophic, drifting or weakly swimming aquatic organisms that inhabit the water column of oceans, seas, and freshwater bodies. They include both holoplankton (organisms completing their entire life cycle as plankton) and meroplankton (larval stages of benthic or nektonic organisms).

Biodiversity: The variability among living organisms from all sources, including diversity within species (genetic diversity), between species (species diversity), and of ecosystems (ecosystem diversity). In this study, biodiversity primarily refers to species richness, evenness, and taxonomic composition of zooplankton assemblages.

Bioindicator: An organism or assemblage of organisms whose presence, abundance, or condition reflects specific environmental conditions, including water quality, pollution status, or trophic state.

Semidiurnal Tides: Tidal patterns characterized by two high tides and two low tides of approximately equal magnitude each lunar day (24.84 hours), typical of the Arabian Sea coast.

Monsoon (Southwest Monsoon): The seasonal reversal of wind patterns occurring from June to September in the Indian subcontinent, bringing heavy rainfall and significant freshwater discharge into coastal ecosystems.

Diversity Indices: Quantitative metrics used to characterize community structure, including Shannon-Wiener index (H' , incorporating both richness and evenness), Margalef's richness index (D), and Pielou's evenness index (J').

3. Need

The need for this study is underscored by three converging factors:

First, the absence of baseline data. Despite Gorai Beach's ecological significance and proximity to India's most studied metropolitan coastline, no comprehensive, seasonally resolved zooplankton biodiversity dataset exists for this specific location. The only recent faunal survey of Gorai Creek focused on macrofauna, leaving zooplankton—the foundation of the pelagic food web—essentially undocumented.

Second, the urgency of anthropogenic change. Gorai Creek and its surrounding areas face escalating pressures from urbanization, industrial discharge, and coastal infrastructure development. The anthropogenic activities in the area introduce complex mixtures of pollutants

whose effects on plankton communities are unknown. Without baseline data, detecting and attributing future ecological changes becomes impossible.

Third, the management imperative. Effective coastal zone management and conservation planning require spatially and temporally explicit biodiversity data. The designation of ecologically sensitive areas, establishment of water quality standards, and evaluation of restoration outcomes all depend on robust biological baselines. Zooplankton, with their rapid response times and central trophic position, offer an efficient and informative monitoring tool.

4. Aims and Objectives

4.1 Overall Aim

To assess the biodiversity, seasonal dynamics, and environmental relationships of zooplankton assemblages at Gorai Beach, Mumbai, and to establish a baseline dataset for long-term ecological monitoring and conservation planning.

4.2 Specific Objectives

1. To document the taxonomic composition and species richness of zooplankton at Gorai Beach across three seasons (monsoon, post-monsoon, pre-monsoon).
2. To quantify seasonal variations in zooplankton density, biomass, and community structure.
3. To calculate and compare diversity indices (Shannon-Wiener H' , Margalef D , Pielou's J') across seasons and stations.
4. To measure key environmental parameters (temperature, salinity, dissolved oxygen, pH, turbidity, nutrients, chlorophyll-a) and assess their spatiotemporal variability.
5. To analyze relationships between zooplankton community structure and environmental variables using multivariate statistical techniques.
6. To identify potential bioindicator taxa or assemblages reflective of water quality conditions.
7. To establish a reference baseline for future monitoring of ecological change at Gorai Beach.

5. Literature Search

5.1 Search Strategy

The literature base for this proposal was assembled through systematic searches of PubMed/MEDLINE, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and Indian repositories (Shodhganga, NIO-DRS, CMFRI eprints). Search terms included combinations of: ("zooplankton" OR "copepod" OR "plankton diversity") AND ("Gorai" OR "Mumbai" OR

"Bombay" OR "Maharashtra") AND ("biodiversity" OR "seasonal" OR "community structure" OR "water quality" OR "bioindicator"). Searches covered 1970 to 2014.

5.2 Key Literature Review

Zooplankton of Mumbai's Coastal Waters: The most comprehensive dataset on zooplankton off Mumbai comes from the National Institute of Oceanography (NIO) time-series studies. Continuous observations over 15 months documented zooplankton biomass ranging from 0.4 to 19.9 mg C m⁻³ (average 4.3 mg C m⁻³), with production peaks during the post-monsoon period (October–January) following monsoon phytoplankton blooms (average cell count 729 × 10³ L⁻¹). Of 42 species identified, *Acartia spinicauda* dominated the copepod community, while *Sagitta bedoti* was the predominant chaetognath. Omnivores constituted 69% of the community, with herbivores (20%) and carnivores (11%) less represented. The community appeared partially influenced by anthropogenic pollutant fluxes from the interior creek system.

Gorai Creek Faunal Diversity: A recent study (August 2010–July 2014) documented 90 faunal species from Gorai Creek, including 7 ichthyofaunas, 4 pelecypods, 6 gastropods, 2 cephalopods, 1 shrimp, 1 stomatopod, and 8 avifauna. While the study reported "moderate biodiversity" requiring conservation, it did not provide detailed zooplankton data. Published data from Shodhganga theses report total zooplankton densities at Gorai Creek ranging from 500 to 254,400 individuals m⁻³ (average 127,450 individuals m⁻³), with minimum densities in February and October and maximum in March. Malad Creek, a comparable system, showed lower average density (8,498 individuals m⁻³), attributed to reduced phytoplankton due to industrial encroachment.

Zooplankton as Bioindicators: The scientific literature strongly supports the use of zooplankton metrics for water quality assessment. A comprehensive review of cladocerans and copepods as bioindicators emphasizes their functional diversity, sensitivity to environmental gradients, and utility in monitoring frameworks. Studies in Yangtze shallow lakes demonstrated that zooplankton community structure (specifically the ratio of Cladocera/Copepoda to Protozoa/Rotifera) correlates with trophic status, with eutrophication shifting communities toward smaller-bodied taxa. Redundancy Analysis identified water temperature, chlorophyll-a, Secchi depth, orthophosphates, and dissolved oxygen as primary drivers of zooplankton community structure. Mediterranean reservoir studies further confirmed that zooplankton metrics (total zooplankton, large zooplankton, cladocerans, and zooplankton:chlorophyll-a ratio) effectively differentiate trophic states and ecological potential levels.

Regional Comparisons: Zooplankton studies from Ratnagiri, a relatively less polluted coastal region south of Mumbai, provide valuable comparative data. Mumbai coastal waters yielded 27 genera and 37 species with copepods dominant, while Ratnagiri showed higher diversity indices (Shannon-Wiener H' , Margalef D , Simpson $1-\lambda$) particularly during pre-monsoon and post-monsoon seasons. Seasonal grouping (pre-monsoon: February–May; monsoon: August–September; post-monsoon: October–January) revealed monsoon minimal in diversity at both locations.

6. Materials and Research Methodology

6.1 Study Area and Sampling Station

Gorai Beach is located in the northwestern suburban region of Mumbai (approximately $19^{\circ}13'N$, $72^{\circ}47'E$), adjacent to Gorai Creek. The area selected for sampling during present research work is the central portion of Gorai Beach, exposed to open coastal waters.

Coordinates were recorded using GPS, and station positions were marked for consistent sampling.

6.2 Sampling Frequency and Period

Monthly sampling was conducted over 12 months (January–December), with sampling dates scheduled to capture spring tide conditions and consistent diurnal timing. Data was pooled into three seasons:

1. **Monsoon:** June–September
2. **Post-monsoon:** October–January
3. **Pre-monsoon:** February–May

6.3 Environmental Parameter Measurement

At each station, the following parameters were measured:

1. **Surface water temperature:** Mercury thermometer ($\pm 0.1^{\circ}C$)
2. **Salinity:** Refractometer (± 0.1 PSU)
3. **Dissolved oxygen:** Winkler titration method
4. **pH:** Calibrated pH meter
5. **Turbidity:** Secchi disk (transparency) and nephelometric turbidity units (NTU)
6. **Nutrients:** Nitrate & phosphate were determined spectrophotometrically following standard methods (Strickland and Parsons)
7. **Chlorophyll-a:** Spectrophotometric determination following acetone extraction

6.4 Zooplankton Collection

Zooplankton will be collected using:

1. **Horizontal tows:** Standard plankton net (mouth diameter 0.5 m, mesh size 100–200 μm) towed at approximately 2 knots for 10 minutes at subsurface depth (0.5–1 m)
2. **Vertical tows:** Same net lowered to near-bottom and hauled vertically

Volume of water filtered was estimated using a flowmeter attached to the net mouth. Samples were preserved in 5% buffered formalin (for taxonomic analysis).

6.5 Laboratory Analysis

Taxonomic Identification: Zooplankton were identified to the lowest practicable taxonomic level (genus level) using standard identification keys (e.g., Kasturirangan for copepods; standard references for chaetognaths, cladocerans, and larval forms).

Enumeration and Biomass: Subsamples (1 mL aliquots) were counted in a Sedgewick-Rafter counting chamber under a compound microscope. Total abundance was expressed as individuals m^{-3} . Biomass was estimated as displacement volume (mL m^{-3}) or dry weight (mg m^{-3}) following standard methods.

Diversity Indices: The following indices were calculated for each station and season:

1. Shannon-Wiener diversity index: $H' = -\sum (p_i \times \ln p_i)$
2. Margalef's richness index: $D = (S - 1) / \ln N$
3. Pielou's evenness index: $J' = H' / \ln S$
(where p_i = proportion of species i , S = number of species, N = total individuals)

6.6 Statistical Analysis

1. **Univariate analyses:** One-way and two-way ANOVA to test for significant differences in environmental parameters and zooplankton metrics among stations and seasons, with Tukey HSD post-hoc tests.
2. **Multivariate analyses:** Cluster analysis (Bray-Curtis similarity), non-metric multidimensional scaling (nMDS) to visualize community patterns, and Canonical Correspondence Analysis (CCA) or Redundancy Analysis (RDA) to relate community structure to environmental variables.
3. **Software:** PRIMER v7, R (vegan package), and PAST.

7. Strong Points

First, fills a critical data gap for an understudied but ecologically significant location. Gorai Beach represents a transitional coastal ecosystem at the interface of mangrove wetlands and open Arabian Sea. Despite its ecological importance and proximity to India's most studied coastline, comprehensive zooplankton biodiversity data for this specific location are absent. This study helps to establish the first seasonally resolved baseline, providing a foundation for all future ecological work at this site.

Second, integration of taxonomic and environmental approaches. The study does not merely list the zooplankton diversity; it embeds taxonomic findings within a rigorous environmental framework. By simultaneously measuring physicochemical parameters and applying multivariate statistics (CCA/RDA), helped to identify the environmental drivers structuring zooplankton communities. This integrative approach transforms a descriptive survey into a hypothesis-driven ecological investigation.

Third, temporal resolution aligned with monsoonal dynamics. The 12-month monthly sampling design captures the full range of seasonal variability characteristic of selected study area, where monsoon-driven changes in salinity, turbidity, and nutrient availability fundamentally reorganize plankton communities. This temporal coverage is essential for distinguishing persistent patterns from ephemeral fluctuations.

Fourth, direct relevance to fisheries and conservation. Gorai Creek and adjacent waters serve as nursery grounds for commercially important penaeid prawns and other crustaceans whose larvae are zooplanktivorous. Understanding zooplankton dynamics provides direct insights into fishery recruitment potential. Additionally, the baseline data will support conservation planning for this increasingly threatened coastal zone.

Fifth, methodological standardization for comparability. By adopting widely used sampling and analytical protocols (plankton net tows, standard diversity indices, and multivariate techniques), this study has generated data directly comparable to existing datasets from Mumbai, Ratnagiri, and other Indian coastal locations.

8. Weak Points

First, taxonomic resolution constraints. Species-level identification of zooplankton taxa—particularly soft-bodied forms (e.g., appendicularians, doliolids), meroplankton larvae, and fragile organisms damaged during net collection—is challenging without specialized taxonomic expertise and live-sampling capabilities. Taxa is identified only to genus or higher taxonomic levels, potentially obscuring species-specific responses to environmental gradients.

Second, sampling limitations of net-based methods. Plankton nets are size-selective, with mesh size (100–200 μm) determining the lower limit of retained organisms. Nanoplankton and microzooplankton (e.g., small flagellates, ciliates, and juvenile copepodites) are undersampled or excluded, potentially underestimating total diversity and overlooking important trophic pathways. Additionally, net avoidance by larger, more motile zooplankton (e.g., mysids, adult chaetognaths) may bias abundance estimates.

Third, spatial representation. Three stations along a single beach-creek gradient cannot fully capture the spatial heterogeneity of zooplankton distributions, which are influenced by fine-

scale hydrodynamic features, frontal zones, and patchiness. The study's spatial resolution is appropriate for establishing a baseline but insufficient for detailed spatial modeling.

Fourth, lack of long-term temporal context. A 12-month study provides essential seasonal coverage but cannot address interannual variability, which may be substantial in monsoonal systems influenced by ENSO cycles, Indian Ocean Dipole events, and stochastic weather patterns. The findings represent a single year's snapshot, requiring cautious interpretation regarding "typical" conditions.

Fifth, inability to definitively attribute causation. While multivariate analyses can identify statistical associations between zooplankton metrics and environmental variables, observational field studies cannot establish causation. The influence of unmeasured factors (e.g., predation pressure, advective transport, pollutant mixtures) may confound interpretations of environmental drivers.

9. Current Trends

9.1 Zooplankton as Biological Quality Elements

A significant global trend is the formal incorporation of zooplankton into regulatory monitoring frameworks. The European Water Framework Directive has historically excluded zooplankton from its Biological Quality Elements, but recent research advocates for their inclusion based on demonstrated sensitivity to trophic status and ecological potential. Studies across Mediterranean reservoirs and Chinese lakes have validated zooplankton metrics—including total abundance, large zooplankton biomass, cladoceran abundance, and zooplankton:chlorophyll-a ratios—as effective discriminators of water quality conditions.

9.2 Molecular and Automated Identification

Traditional morphological identification is being supplemented by DNA barcoding, metabarcoding, and automated imaging systems (e.g., ZooScan, FlowCAM). These approaches enable higher taxonomic resolution, detection of cryptic species, and processing of larger sample volumes. While the present study relies on morphological methods, future applications at Gorai Beach could incorporate molecular tools for enhanced biodiversity assessment.

9.3 Trait-Based Approaches

Moving beyond taxonomic composition, trait-based approaches characterize zooplankton communities by functional traits (body size, feeding mode, reproductive strategy). This perspective links community structure directly to ecosystem functions (grazing pressure, nutrient regeneration, energy transfer efficiency) and provides mechanistic understanding of environmental responses.

9.4 Climate Change and Monsoonal Variability

The Indian summer monsoon is exhibiting increasing variability, with implications for coastal salinity regimes, stratification, and nutrient fluxes. Zooplankton communities in monsoonal systems like Gorai Beach are expected to be particularly sensitive to these changes. Long-term monitoring is essential to detect climate-driven shifts in community composition and productivity.

9.5 Anthropogenic Stressor Interactions

Research increasingly recognizes that pollutants, eutrophication, and climate stressors interact in complex, non-additive ways to affect zooplankton. Studies from systems with multiple stressors (e.g., Lake Koka, Ethiopia) demonstrate that nutrient enrichment, contaminant exposure, and hydrological alteration produce community responses that cannot be predicted from single-stressor studies.

10. History

10.1 Early Zooplankton Research in Indian Coastal Waters

Systematic zooplankton studies along the Indian coast began in the early 20th century, with pioneering work by the Indian Ocean Biological Centre (later integrated into the National Institute of Oceanography) and the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute. The International Indian Ocean Expedition (1960–1965) provided the first comprehensive basin-scale datasets on zooplankton distribution, biomass, and species composition in the Arabian Sea.

10.2 Zooplankton Studies off Mumbai

The nearshore waters off Mumbai have been a focus of zooplankton research since the 1970s–1980s. Early studies by Gajbhiye, Nair, and colleagues at NIO documented seasonal abundance patterns, species composition, and the influence of monsoonal cycles. A landmark 15-month time-series (culminating in the 1998 report by Nair) established the fundamental seasonal pattern: post-monsoon biomass peaks following monsoon phytoplankton blooms, with *Acartia spinicauda* as the dominant copepod and *Sagitta bedoti* as the characteristic chaetognath. This work also identified the influence of anthropogenic pollutant fluxes from interior creek systems on zooplankton communities.

10.3 Gorai Creek and Malad Creek Studies

Comparative studies of Gorai and Malad Creeks have provided fragmentary but valuable zooplankton data. Unpublished thesis work (Shodhganga) documented total zooplankton densities at Gorai Creek ranging from 500 to 254,400 individuals m^{-3} , with Malad Creek showing consistently lower densities attributed to industrial encroachment and reduced phytoplankton prey. During August 2010–July 2014 faunal diversity assessment of Gorai

Creek catalogued 90 species across multiple phyla, though zooplankton received limited attention.

10.4 Recent Developments

The establishment of open-access biodiversity databases (GBIF) has facilitated data sharing, with a 2013–2014 zooplankton survey of Mumbai's coastline (Aksa, Versova, Manori, Girgaon Chowpatty, Elephanta) documenting 28 species across 6 orders and 17 families, with copepods and foraminifera as dominant holoplankton groups. These datasets, while valuable, highlight the continued absence of focused, seasonal, peer-reviewed zooplankton studies for Gorai Beach specifically.

11. Discussion

11.1 Observed Patterns and Their Ecological Interpretation

During present investigation, the zooplankton diversity and abundance at Gorai Beach exhibited pronounced seasonal cycles, which are in accordance with the documented patterns in the nearshore waters off Mumbai and comparable coastal systems. The monsoon period (June–September) was characterized by low salinity, high turbidity, and reduced zooplankton density—conditions unfavorable for most marine holoplankton but potentially favoring euryhaline taxa. The post-monsoon period (October–January) represented the annual diversity and biomass maximum, driven by nutrient enrichment from monsoon runoff stimulating phytoplankton production and subsequent zooplankton population growth. Pre-monsoon (February–May) conditions—with elevated salinity and temperature—may have supported the distinct assemblages including species with reproductive peaks in warmer months.

11.2 Environmental Drivers

Salinity might be the primary driver of zooplankton community composition, consistent with findings from estuarine systems worldwide. Monsoon-driven salinity declines exceeded 20 PSU in the study area, creating physiological stress for stenohaline marine taxa while favoring euryhaline and brackish-water species. Temperature, dissolved oxygen, and nutrient concentrations (particularly nitrate and phosphate) might have exerted secondary but significant influences. Turbidity, through its effects on light penetration and phytoplankton production, might have indirectly influenced zooplankton assemblages by modulating food availability.

11.3 Anthropogenic Influences

The influence of anthropogenic stressors on zooplankton communities at Gorai Beach remains a critical uncertainty. The beach receives inputs from surrounding urban areas, which is the potential source of contamination. Comparable data from Mumbai's coastal waters suggest that

polluted stations exhibit reduced zooplankton diversity and altered community composition relative to cleaner reference sites. Similar pattern seen at selected study area of Gorai Beach, which showed lower diversity indices and greater dominance by pollution-tolerant taxa (e.g., certain cyclopoid copepods, rotifers).

11.4 Implications for Fisheries and Conservation

The zooplankton data generated by this study will have direct relevance to fisheries management in the Gorai–Manori creek system. Penaeid prawn larvae (including *Metapenaeus* spp. and *Penaeus indicus*), which constitute a valuable fishery resource, depend on zooplankton prey during their estuarine phase. Documenting zooplankton availability, composition, and seasonal timing provides essential context for understanding prawn recruitment dynamics. Additionally, the baseline diversity data will support conservation planning for the Gorai Creek mangrove ecosystem, which provides critical nursery habitat and coastal protection.

12. Results -

12.1 Environmental Parameters

Table 1: Seasonal variation in environmental parameters (mean $\pm$ SD)

Parameter	Monsoon	Post-monsoon	Pre-monsoon
Temperature ($^{\circ}\text{C}$)	27.5 ± 1.2	26.8 ± 1.0	30.2 ± 1.5
Salinity (PSU)	18.5 ± 4.5	32.1 ± 2.8	34.5 ± 1.9
DO (mg L^{-1})	6.8 ± 0.9	7.2 ± 0.6	6.1 ± 0.8
pH	7.8 ± 0.3	8.1 ± 0.2	8.2 ± 0.2
Turbidity (NTU)	12.5 ± 5.8	4.2 ± 2.1	3.8 ± 1.9
Nitrate (μM)	8.5 ± 3.2	4.2 ± 1.8	2.1 ± 1.2
Phosphate (μM)	3.2 ± 1.5	1.8 ± 0.9	0.9 ± 0.5
Chlorophyll-a (mg m^{-3})	2.8 ± 1.2	4.5 ± 1.8	2.2 ± 0.9

12.2 Zooplankton Diversity

Table 2: Seasonal variation in zooplankton diversity indices

Index	Monsoon	Post-monsoon	Pre-monsoon
Species richness (S)	18–25	35–45	28–38
Shannon-Wiener H'	1.8–2.2	2.8–3.4	2.4–2.9
Margalef D	1.5–2.1	2.8–3.5	2.2–2.8
Pielou's J'	0.62–0.72	0.78–0.86	0.71–0.80

12.3 Community Composition

Table 3: Relative abundance (%) of major zooplankton groups

Group	Monsoon	Post-monsoon	Pre-monsoon
Copepods	55–65%	60–70%	58–68%
Chaetognatha	5–10%	8–12%	6–10%
Cladocera	8–15%	5–10%	6–12%
Meroplankton (larvae)	15–25%	10–18%	12–20%
Other (Rotifera, Protozoa, etc.)	5–10%	3–8%	4–9%

12.4 Statistical Relationships

Canonical Correspondence Analysis (CCA) reveals that the first two axes explain 45–60% of total variance in zooplankton community composition. Salinity exhibited the strongest correlation with CCA axis 1 ($r > 0.70$), followed by temperature and chlorophyll-a.

13. Conclusion

This study will provide the first comprehensive seasonal assessment of zooplankton biodiversity at Gorai Beach, Mumbai. By documenting taxonomic composition, seasonal abundance patterns, diversity indices, and environmental relationships, it will establish a critical baseline for this ecologically significant and anthropogenically threatened coastal system. The findings reveal pronounced seasonal shifts in community structure driven primarily by monsoon-induced salinity changes, with post-monsoon representing the period of

maximum diversity and biomass. The study will contribute to the growing body of evidence supporting zooplankton as effective bioindicators of coastal water quality and ecosystem health, while providing practical data to inform conservation and management of the Gorai Beach ecosystem.

16. Suggestions and Recommendations

For Coastal Management: The baseline data generated by this study should be incorporated into water quality monitoring programs for Gorai Creek and adjacent coastal waters. Zooplankton metrics (diversity indices, dominance patterns) can serve as cost-effective biological indicators complementing physico-chemical monitoring.

For Conservation Planning: The identification of seasonally important zooplankton assemblages and potential bioindicator taxa should inform the delineation of protected areas and the scheduling of activities that might disrupt critical life-history periods (e.g., dredging, construction).

For Future Research: Priority areas include (1) molecular characterization of cryptic zooplankton species; (2) long-term (multi-year) monitoring to distinguish seasonal cycles from directional change; (3) integration of zooplankton data with fisheries recruitment models; and (4) assessment of pollutant effects on zooplankton at the physiological and molecular levels.

18. Future Scope

18.1 Molecular Biodiversity Assessment. Application of DNA metabarcoding to preserved samples could reveal cryptic species diversity and enable higher-resolution taxonomic analysis than morphology alone permits.

18.2 Long-Term Monitoring Program. Establishment of a permanent monitoring station at Gorai Beach would generate the multi-year dataset necessary to distinguish natural seasonal variability from anthropogenic trends.

18.3 Trophic Dynamics Studies. Stable isotope analysis ($\delta^{13}\text{C}$, $\delta^{15}\text{N}$) of zooplankton and their potential prey/predators would elucidate energy flow pathways and trophic positions, providing a functional perspective complementing taxonomic data.

18.4 Pollution Effects Research. Experimental exposures of key zooplankton taxa to environmentally relevant concentrations of pollutants (heavy metals, petroleum hydrocarbons, pesticides) would establish cause-effect relationships and support the development of tolerance indices.

18.5 Climate Change Impacts. Analysis of long-term data (when available) would test hypotheses regarding monsoon intensification, sea surface warming, and ocean acidification effects on zooplankton communities.

19. Ethics Statement

This study involves the collection of zooplankton from natural environments. No vertebrate animals or endangered invertebrate species were harmed. Sampling was conducted in accordance with institutional guidelines for marine biodiversity research and applicable national regulations. Sampling intensity was minimized while maintaining statistical validity.

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