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# People-Nature- Culture of a Place – Understanding Festivals of the Sundarbans

**Dr. Suptendu P. Biswas**



**Dr. Suptendu P. Biswas**, is an international award-winning architect, urban designer and planning professional, involved in consultancy, teaching, research and writing for almost three decades. He works on overlapping fields: design & planning of built environment, urban services, landscape urbanism, heritage and social & cultural studies. His multi-faceted works have been presented, published and exhibited in India and abroad. He has also worked as a key consultant for Jaipur Smart city project and taught as a visiting faculty member in post-grad courses at SPA-Delhi. He is a member of Doctoral Review Committee of SPA-Bhopal and one of the founder trustees of SEARCH, a Kolkata-based charitable trust working on urban sustainability and related spheres. His critically acclaimed book, *Assorted City*, was shortlisted among the best five urban writings in 2016-17. This article is based on his research (2014-2016) under the Senior Fellowship from the Ministry of Culture, Government of India.

# People-Nature-Culture of a Place – Understanding Festivals of the Sundarbans

## Introduction

Culture is the reflection of the way of life and contains both material and non-material elements. Among the non-material aspects, the festivals of a place usually capture beliefs, rituals and customs of people. Social practices surrounding the festive events also help structure the formation of communities and social groups and, to a great extent, are points of convergence for otherwise divisive societies or its disparate members. The following anecdote narrated by eminent historian Sushil Chaudhury is extremely appropriate in this context:

... About five decades back I was travelling in the then Santal Parganas (now Jharkand), when I saw a group of Santals, who were Christians, sacrificing cocks at the altar of their popular/tribal god. When I asked them how could they do this when they are Christians, they answered back, “aamra kestan hote pari, ta bole to nijer dhamma (dharma) bhulte parina” (we may be Christians but how can we be oblivious of our ‘religion’?). This is rather quite instructive. Here ‘religion’ is nothing but a way of life as much as culture is, and the two mingle at some point – one cannot be separated from the other completely. --- (Chaudhury, 2013, p. 2)



The aim here is to understand how people, nature and culture conjoin with each other in the form of festivals, which transcends to become the culture of the place and contributes to the society at large. Situated within the present time-frame, Indian part of the Sundarbans is the focus here to trace if place-specific cultural uniqueness exists in the culture of festivals in this region, where man and nature coexist in a very delicate setting.

Etymologically, the word ‘*Sundar ban*’ means ‘a beautiful jungle’ in Bengali. The landscape of the area is, indeed, beautiful with narrow creeks intertwined with the green forests (Figure 4). Many believe that the name was originated from the ‘Sundari’ trees, present all over the forest. The identity and perception of the region are associated with a grand forest, majestic tigers and wildlife. The largest mangrove belt of the world, it is considered as ‘one of the most biologically productive of all natural ecosystems’ and was declared a world heritage by UNESCO in 1987. Total area of Sundarbans of India and Bangladesh, now, stands to be around twenty-five thousand sq. km. Presently, with more than nine thousand sq. km of area, the Indian part includes areas of the North and the South 24 Parganas districts in West Bengal and is bounded by Ichhamati-Raimangal-Kalindi rivers in the east, the Hooghly river in the west, the Bay of Bengal in the south, and the ‘Dampier-Hodges Line’ in the north drawn in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to demarcate government’s own estate (Figure 1).



**Fig.1.** Sundarbans Region in India and Bangladesh. (Source: Author, Redrawn from: [http://assets.wfindia.org/img/original/sundarban\\_map.jpg](http://assets.wfindia.org/img/original/sundarban_map.jpg), Accessed 10 Aug, 2016)

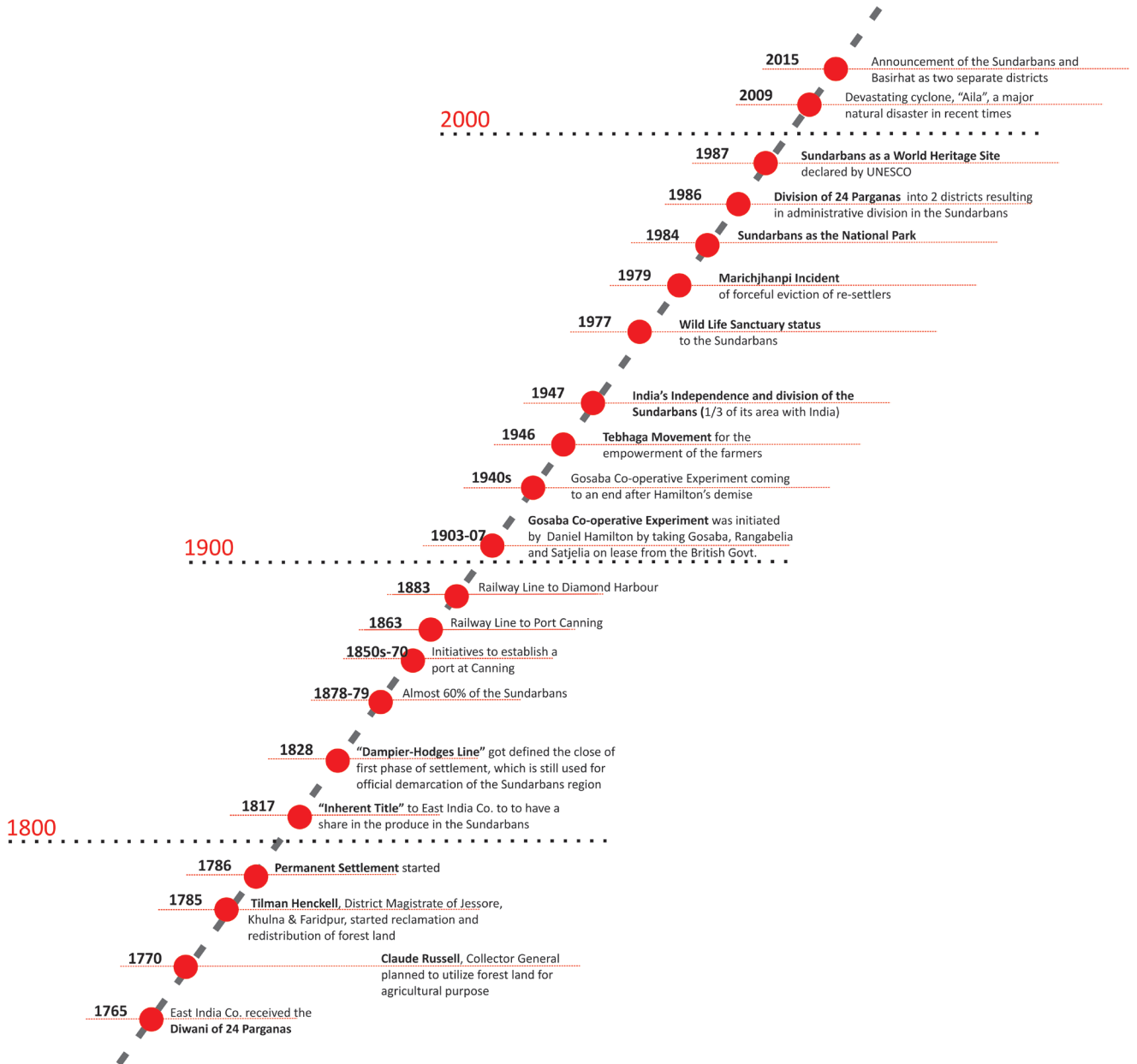
Notes: Indian part of the Sundarbans consists of thirteen blocks in the South 24 Parganas and six blocks in the North 24 Parganas.

The history of the Sundarbans is chequered with many twist and turns as a reflection of larger politics of the colonial and postcolonial India (Figure 3).

Ecosystem here is fragile. The entire island system has suffered land loss and rate of erosion has been high. With regard to the change in land utilization, between 2001 and 2008, the settlement area has significantly increased by 26.4 percent (from 1226 sq. km. to 1666 sq. km.) while the available agricultural land got reduced by 21.3 percent (from 2149 sq. km. to 1691 sq. km.). As per 2001 Census, total population of the region was about 37.56 lakh and the primary occupation is agriculture, supported by fishery, forestry and handicrafts (Department of Sundarban Affairs, n.d.). People, in general, are poor and live primarily on natural resources around as ‘ecosystem people’. In his fiction, *The Hungry Tide*, novelist Amitav Ghosh (2013 (2004)) uses the signification of ‘hunger’, to give an account of tough life in the Sundarbans and effectively uses the metaphor of tiger as a form of ‘nature’s hunger’ to describe the social and religious life. Most of the festivals in this region are specific to the place and often connected with the harvesting season and spread across the year.

**Fig. 2. Major Rail and Road networks.**  
 (Source: Author, Redrawn from: [http://awsassets.wfindia.org/img/original/sundarban\\_blockmap\\_8june1.jpg](http://awsassets.wfindia.org/img/original/sundarban_blockmap_8june1.jpg), and Google Maps, Accessed 10 Aug, 2016)  
 Notes: Railway networks are shown in dashed black lines, major roads are shown in red lines





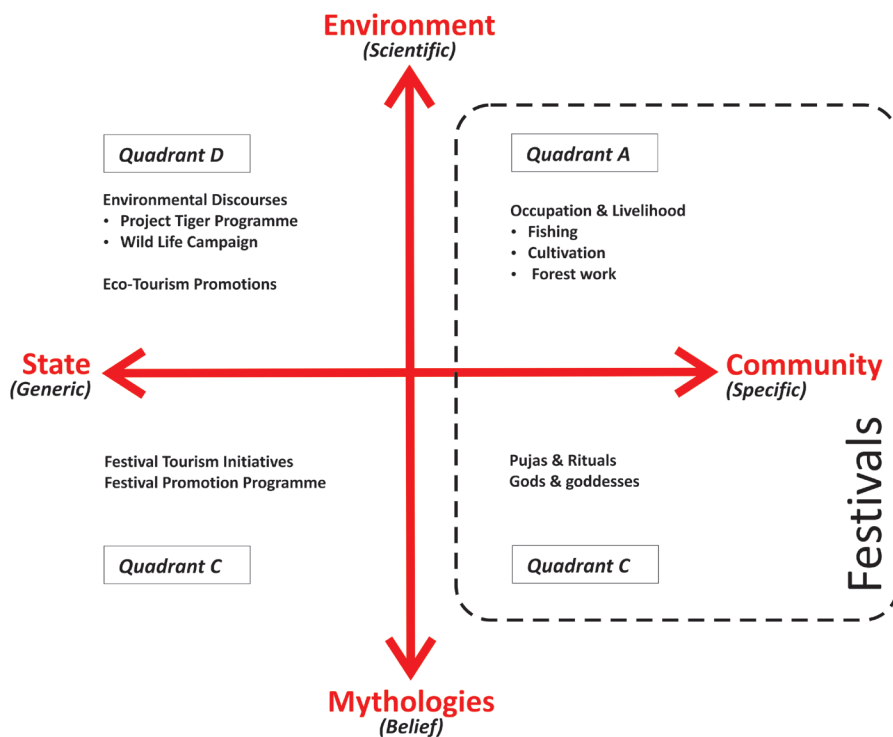
*Fig. 3. Timeline Snapshot of the Sundarbans.  
(Source: Author, historical information from: Sarkar S.C., 2010; Bera & Sahay, 2010)*





## Operative Framework

An operative framework is created to critically arrange main aspects and actors in relation with each other (Figure 5). ‘Environment’ is a rationalist understanding of natural assets of the place and ‘mythologies’ are formed out of folklores, beliefs and legends, essentially non-rationalist conceptualization. The knowledge-range about the Sundarbans lies between concepts of ‘environment’ and ‘mythologies’. On the other axis, community and state forms two ends of collective living. Community is ‘unstructured, rudimentary structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*’ (Turner, 1969 (2008), p. 360). The state, on the contrary, is a structured impersonal entity, a wider interpretation of which may also include world-wide umbrella organizations. The Sundarbans exist between these two notions – ‘state’ and ‘community’ – between generality and specificity.



**(Facing page): Fig. 4.**  
Genius Loci of the Sundarbans.  
(Source: Author)

*Notes: The river-forest-people relationship makes the Genius Loci, the spirit of the place. Deeper forest areas have meze of rivulets and narrow creeks flanked with dense Mangrove forest form a unique landscape. In low-tide, flood plains get exposed, whereas, earth embankment protects village from the high tide. A lot of people depend on the forest for livelihood and thus, face life-risk, especially from the ferocious tigers who often leave their pugmarks (top right). Festivals and mythologies, too, are conceived around this man-tiger co-existence. The huts, the pond, greenery and agricultural field around, together, form the settlement unit (the homestead, 'bhite' in Bengali) in which the multi-utility courtyard remains as the focus.*

**Fig. 5.** Operative Framework.  
(Source: Author)

Here, community interacts directly with the environment because of their occupation (Figure 5, Quadrant A). Fishing involves the understanding of the river and aquatic life. Working (in) the forest, namely wood-cutting, honey and wax collection etc. needs deep knowledge of it. Cultivation, too, brings another set of knowledge systems on environment and land as well. Interestingly, a lot of religious festivals and rituals are to seek divine help for resolving various occupational issues and threats.

In the Sundarbans, community has overarching relationships with the mythologies of the place (Figure 5, Quadrant B). As the literatures suggest, different mythologies have emerged to bring good fortunes and save them from all possible adverse situations. With that belief, folklores and legends have also been developed and rituals are practiced here. Quite often, such mythologies give a commentary of social and religious harmony or, discord.

State's relationship with the mythologies of this place is formed through government's programmes and initiatives (Figure 5, Quadrant C). One assumes that state-sponsored rural and folk festivals, like 'Bonbibi Utsav' organized by the Government of West Bengal, and festival tourism promoted by the government are some of the instances of overlap.

Environment and the state bring together programmes, policies and directives for environment protection, initiated by the government, NGOs, urban middle class and international organizations, are essentially the scientific view of the place (Figure 5, Quadrant D). Promotion of picturesque landscape through tourism programme by the government may also fall in this category.

### **Festivals in the Sundarbans**

The Indian part of the Sundarbans has three broad zones from west to east, each defined by major rivers: Hooghly river to Matla river, Matla to Bidyadhari river, and Bidyadhari to Ichhamati-Kalindi-Raimangal rivers separating India with Bangladesh (Figure 1). One perceived reason for such distinctive zones is because of the corridor of connectivity shared with Kolkata through predominantly north south rail and road routes (Figure 2). The western Sundarbans seems to be more 'sanskritized', perhaps, due to the accessibility to the mainland, influence of the re-



settlers from Medinipur district and the presence of Gangasagar, one of the most sacred places in the Vedic mythology. ‘Gangasagar Mela’, held at the Sagar Island, is the biggest annual festival of the region.<sup>1</sup> However, it is not a Sundarbans-specific festival. Areas situated in the south towards the forest, the ‘Down’ areas, colloquially referred as *abad*, are different from the ‘Up’ areas in the north closer to the mainland because of distinct geographies and social practices (Jalais, 2010).

**Table 1:** Important Festivals in the Sundarbans.  
(Source: Compiled by the Author)

MONTHS	FESTIVAL	PLACE
APRIL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gajan Festival</li> <li>• Goshtho Mela (Horse Race Festival) - (2nd Baishakh)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Neel Shashthi (Moth Mela) Around 10 -11 April at Chitrashali Moth (Sitakundu: Baruipur)</li> <li>Next day: (Around 11-12 April) Dakkhin Rai Temple-Dhaphdhabi Charak Mela at many places in the Sundarbans</li> <li>• Jatar Deul (Raidighi: Mathurapur II)</li> </ul>
AUGUST	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Urs Utsav (17 Shraavan)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Death Anniversary of Pir Mubarak Ghazi Ghutari Sharif: Canning (1-day)</li> </ul>
NOVEMBER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dakkhin Rai's Puja (Continues till the month of Chaitra)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At many places in the Sundarbans</li> </ul>
DECEMBER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bonbibima's Puja (continues till the month of Chaitra)</li> <li>• Christmas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kultikari village Diamond Harbour</li> <li>• At many places in the Sundarbans, especially in the Gosaba</li> </ul>
JANUARY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gangasagar Mela (12-14 Jan: Makar Sankranti)</li> <li>• Kalu Gazi Puja (on Makar Sankranti)</li> <li>• Jatal Utsav (1st Magh)</li> <li>• Bara Thakur Puja (1st Magh- Jatal)</li> <li>• Bishalakshi Puja</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sagar Island</li> <li>• Kalutala Village: Hasnabad</li> <li>• Dhaphdhabi: Baruipur</li> <li>• Villages of Diamond Harbour</li> <li>• Indrapur: Pathar Pratima</li> </ul>
FEBRUARY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dakkhin Rai Puja</li> <li>• Death Anniversary of Pir Gorachand (12th Phalgun/ around 26/27 Feb)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dhaphdhabi: Baruipur</li> <li>Villages of Diamond Harbour</li> <li>• Haroa (Near Basirhat)</li> </ul>
MARCH	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bishalakshi Puja</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mrinal Nagar: Kakdwp (7-day Mela starting from Dol Purnima)</li> <li>Sridhar Nagar: Pathar Pratima (1-day Mela)</li> </ul>

Sundarbans has two main seasons of the local festivals: one, during *Charak Sankranti* at the end of the Bengali calendar and, the other, *Makar Sankranti* at the time of winter solstice (Table 1). People of different communities – participants, visitors, vendors and buyers – and activities of diverse nature enrich these festivals (Figure 6). Many vendors move from one fair to another. *Jatra* (Folk theatre) is held, fire-crackers are burnt, and music is played on during the fair, all of which added to the festive spirit. Food stalls, amusement arenas and toy shops are attractions for the children (Figure 6).

In the beginning half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, Daniel Hamilton's Gosaba islands located deeper into the Sundarbans around Bidya River and its

<sup>1</sup> Gangasagar Mela is held every year at the Sagar Island on the auspicious day of Makar Sankranti, the last day of the Winter Solstice. The mela happens for about 3-4 days before the day when the ‘Sacred Dip’ in the ‘Holy point’ where the Ganges and the sea meet.



*Fig. 6. Festive activities.*  
(Source: Author)



tributaries, witnessed egalitarian and secular society formed on the ideals of co-operative movements in Europe. Hamilton's ideas of cooperation among people from all castes and religions in these 'Down' islands had its positive impacts, lauded by many eminent personalities, including Rabindranath Tagore. Even today, sizeable Christian population are settled in these islands along with Hindus and Muslims. Christmas in this part takes vivid clues from Hindu symbols and is a festival for all (Figure 7). Historically, there have also been many popular *Gazi*, *Pir* and *Fakir* in lower Bengal. A *Gazi* was essentially a religious fighter. A *Pir* was the 'patron saint' of rural Bengal where ballads were sung in their name and shrines, were made; whereas a *Fakir* controlled the forest and was the 'patron saint of woodcutters' (Jalais, 2010, p. 155). Different versions of information exist on popular Gazis like, Gazi Baba, Mobra Gazi, Barakhan Gazi, Zinda Gazi, Raktan Gazi etc. in the Sundarbans and its surroundings. Pir Mubarak Shah Gazi of Ghutiari Sharif is one such revered icon (Figure 7). As per the Bengali Calendar, 17 *Shravan* in the beginning of August is his Death Anniversary of the Pir Mubarak Shah when lakhs of people from different religious and socio-economic groups visit the *Dargah*. Devotees begin to reach Sharif from the morning of 16 *Shravan*; they start taking the bath on 17 *Shravan* from around 2 pm at night onwards. The festival goes on till the next evening (18 *Shravan*). It is called *Mazar ziyarat*.

*Fig. 7. Related to other important Festivals.  
(Source: Author)*



*Shrine of Pir Mubarak Shah Gazi at Ghutiari Sharif, Canning.*



*Christmas Cribs in a house at Gosaba.*

I shall touch upon few key festivals here in little more details to bring out salient features.

**Gajan Festival:** *Gajan*, observed during the *Chaitra Sankranti*, brings the end of the spring and mark the beginning of the Bengali New Year. Such a festival is almost unknown outside Bengal, yet, involves lakhs of rural Bengalis for a week or more in every spring. Interestingly, the word ‘*gajan*’ was perhaps used for the first time in *Dharma Mangal* and not in Shaivite texts (Nicholas, 2008). *Gajan*, *Neel puja* and *Charak Mela* all take place around this time. *Neel*, meaning the colour blue, came from one of Shiva’s acronym, *Neelkanth* (one whose throat is blue). *Neel Puja* is usually observed by Bengali Hindu women to seek blessings for their husband and children by worshipping Lord Shiva and celebrating the divine marriage of Lord Shiva with Devi Parvati. The tradition of *Charak Puja*, performed on the last day of the Bengali year (around 14<sup>th</sup> April) is about worshipping the *Charak* tree and the several self-punishing acts performed by ascetics of *Charak* (*Charak Sanyasi*) around and on the tree. *Charak* (originated from *Chakra* meaning wheel) represents the time-space continuum – rotation of the earth (space) and completion of a year (time). Like a number of places in the region, Shreemoti, a small village in South 24 Parganas district holds a very vibrant *Charak Mela* (Figure 8).

**Fig. 8.** Devotees in *Charak Mela* at Shreemoti.



Three key ritualistic components differentiate *Gajan* from other Bengali festivals: (1) renouncement of worldly life for the duration of the ritual; (2) arduous series of physical ordeals undertaken during the ritual; and (3) the offerings (*arghya*) made to the Sun (Surya) in a distinctive form during the ritual (Nicholas, 2008, pp. 4-5). *Gajan* is the festival of the subalterns and their empowerment in a more egalitarian sense. Rituals are mostly observed by the people from so-called lower caste, who are often economically weaker too. In this period, they wear a ‘sacred thread’ like the Brahmins. Devotees also inflict ordeals upon themselves in their quest to be close to god. *Gajan* did not belong to the classical Hindu festivals to begin with. Later, Brahmins started doing the puja, perhaps, recognizing the growing acceptance of the festival. The prayer and mantra in Shiv Gajan is an amalgamation of the Shiva of Bengal, the Shiva of Puran and interestingly, the god Dharma (Nicholas, 2008). All these indicate how the process of cultural specificity improvises the myth-making through inclusion and appropriation.

**Goshtho Mela at Jatar Deul:** Jatar Deul, (‘the Abode of the Shiva’), the 11<sup>th</sup> century brick-built Shiva temple located at Raidighi in the South 24 Parganas district about 80 km from Kolkata, is an Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) protected structure (Figure 9). The temple is considered to be the remains of a thriving settlement along the nearby Muni River and might be an important pilgrimage destination during Sen Period around 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries (Sarkar S. , 2012). The *Mela* is organized on 2<sup>nd</sup> *Baishakh* (around 15<sup>th</sup> April) every year. It is a unique festival of this place. *Goshtho*, in Bengali, refers to the devotees of the *Charak* puja. Horse-racing is the most popular and attractive part of the festival that holds a range of activities, pujas, and rituals related to *Charak Sankranti* and *Gajan*. The temple sits curiously within large agricultural fields where horse-racing during the *Goshtho Mela* happens. No authentic document is found to pinpoint the beginning of this event. Local people believe that it started many years back. LSS O’Malley’s (1914) 24 Parganas Gazetteer of 1911, too, mentioned about this festival attended by a thousand people – indeed, a big crowd at that time! All the horse-riders, I noticed, were boys around 14-16-year age-group, few younger ones as well, and most of them came from nearby areas. The race took a full round of the field and ended up





**Fig. 9. Goshtho Mela.**  
 (Source: Author unless mentioned otherwise)  
**(Clockwise from left):** Jatar Deul Temple with brickwork visible in the ruins; A new shiva linga is being worshipped while the original one is kept aside within the Garbhagriha; Horse-racing at Jatar Deul on Goshtho Mela.  
 (Source: Shibu Bhushan Das)

at the same point. Three such races happened and winner was decided on that basis. The 'Jatar Deul Trust' bears the expense of this festival and the fund is generated through voluntary donations by the community. Many families shifted out of the village to neighbouring towns, yet they actively participate in or send donations for this festival. A number of Muslim families, too, were among the donors and many of them attended the festival with their family as well. These are the instances of attachment that the community has with this festival cutting cut across religious faiths.

**Dakkhin Rai Puja:** Dakkhin Rai, the lord of the tigers, is a significant folk-deity in the Sundarbans. Elaborate discussions on the legends of Dakkhin Rai find place in the *punthi* literature, especially in *Raimangal*, written in 1686 by Krishna Ram Das (Sarkar S. C., 2010). One can see two completely different types of deity of Dakkhin Rai in this region. According to popular Bonbibi folklores, Dakkhin Rai is in the form of tiger-demon in the 'down' islands, whereas in many of the 'up' areas, he is



a god-like figure and a saviour for his devotees. He could be a landlord or, a king of large parts of the Sundarbans, or, a brave hunter who protected local villagers from tigers, or, the army-chief of Mukut Rai, a powerful local king (Basu, 1966 (2008); Choudhury, 2010; Sur, 2010; Jalais, 2010; Sarkar S. C., 2010). Another myth suggests that Dakkhin Rai was the son of Shiva, and the head of Ganesha, when severed from his body, fell in the southern (or, *dakshin*) direction to become a deity of Lord Dakkhin Rai, sometimes also known as Dakknineswar here (Basu, 1966 (2008), p. 146).

His unique temple is in Dhaphdhabi about 10 km from Baruipur in the South 24 Parganas district. Dhaphdhabi was originally part of the forested

**Fig. 10.** *Dakkhin Rai Puja during Charak Sankranti, Dhaphdhabi, Baruipur.*  
(Source: Author)



areas of the Sundarbans. Earlier, in the absence of an idol, wood-cutters (*bauli*) used to pray before a piece of rock representing the god. Even today, a rock-piece kept in front of the present idol, is worshipped. The present deity of Baba Dakhhineswar, or Dakkhin Rai, is a recent one and the temple structure was made in 1909 (Figure 10). The unique idol is of a hunter, a white coloured deity of a brave-looking well-built tall human figure with a gun in hand. In one of my visits to Dhaphdhabi, the owner of the photography studio next to the temple shared his personal perception. His mother worked in the temple for long time. Once she was very unwell and needed an operation. The family was helpless, but somehow managed to reach the hospital by 'the grace of god'. He believed that Lord Dakkhin Rai had descended to cure the ailing lady. Many such myths and anecdotes are popular in Dhaphdhabi and around, making Rai a god living in everybody's heart. The puja during Charak Sankranti at Dhaphdhabi temple attracts large gathering. Besides that, during middle of January (*Pous Sankranti* and on the 1<sup>st</sup> *Magh* as per Bengali calendar), Dakkhin Rai's puja happens in a big scale as well. The '*Jatal Puja*' on the 1<sup>st</sup> *Magh* is believed to be on the occasion of his birthday. Since then, from January till the mid-July (month of *Asharh*), Dakkhin Rai's temple is frequented by the devotees (Choudhury, 2010). Although Dakkhin Rai is a folk god, a Brahmin priest performs the rituals. In the absence of any 'original' *mantra* for him, over the years, his mythology has been constructed around Shiva and Ganesha. Accordingly, priests developed certain *mantra* and rituals of Shiv puja are followed to a large extent.

**Bonbibi Puja:** Over the years, Bonbibi has emerged as the symbol of the Sundarbans' own folk deity and is ingrained into the rituals and lives of people especially in the 'down' islands. Bonbibi would mean the 'Lady of the Forest'. She is revered as the protector of the forest including every living being in it. People from villages around Bidya River and its tributaries, are the ones who go to the forest quite regularly. Most of these villages in Gosaba block in the South 24 Parganas district are separated from the forest either by a wide river, or some of its narrower tributaries. This village-river-forest relationship is the *genius loci* of the Sundarbans (Figure 4). Bonbibi's presence in these places epitomizes such a co-existence.

The mythology of Bonbibi came with the Muslims. Interaction

with Sufi saints, process of religious exchanges happened and the legend of Bonbibi started spreading. Different versions of *Bonbibi Johurnama* were written during last two decades of 19<sup>th</sup> century, indicative of Bonbibi gaining popularity around that time. Immigration of Bengali Muslims from the East Pakistan during partition and after, is believed to have contributed to the prominence of this cult in recent times, gradually replacing Dakkhin Rai from the east of Matla (Bera, Mukhopadhyay, & Sarkar, 2010). Her myth narrative has two parts to it. The first part describes how Bonbibi along with her bother Shah Jangli, both sent by God, came from Mecca to the Sundarbans and fought with the tiger-demon, Dakkhin Rai, and rescued people. The second part eulogizes how she had saved a hapless child from the clasp of Dakkhin Rai, who then promised not to cause harm to any devotee of Bonbibi. '*Bonbibi-r Upakhyan*' (the Story of Bonbibi) is a popular folk play by the locals, based on the second part of the mythology of Bonbibi and usually performed by the group of farmers, boatmen, fishermen, honey gatherers, wood-cutters and others (Figure 11). These actors truly believe that spreading the greatness of Bonbibi is their way to please the goddess, who, in turn, would protect them.

Bonbibi idol changes its look in different places. In Muslim dominated areas, her deity looks like an aristocratic Muslim lady and in Hindu areas, she looks more like a traditional Hindu goddess. Puja happens in different scale-levels: in individual houses, in groups before going to the forest, and within the community who usually share similar occupation. Annual worship of Bonbibi usually coincides with important festive days of Hindu calendar like, *Makar Sankranti* for Hindus and Muslims and *Basant Panchami* for the tribals (Bera, Mukhopadhyay, & Sarkar, 2010). Bonbibi rituals symbolize a syncretic tradition outside the conventional *Puranic* customs. Anyone can pray to the goddess in a manner as appropriate. Worshippers chant colloquial verses and not in Sanskrit or any such 'divine' language. Although Muslims are not in the practice of offering prayers to any idol, but, they, too, pray in their own way to Bonbibi before entering into the forest. Survival instinct, one may say, overarches the mainstream religious practices. Small Bonbibi shrines are found at the edge of the forest; and to seek protection of the goddess, red flags are tied by the locals while entering the forest (Figure 11).



*(Left): Bonbibi Shrine near the forest; (Right): Bonbibi puja by the Honey-collectors at Bonbibi Temple.*



*(Left & Right): Different forms of Bonbibi idols in the Sundarbans.*



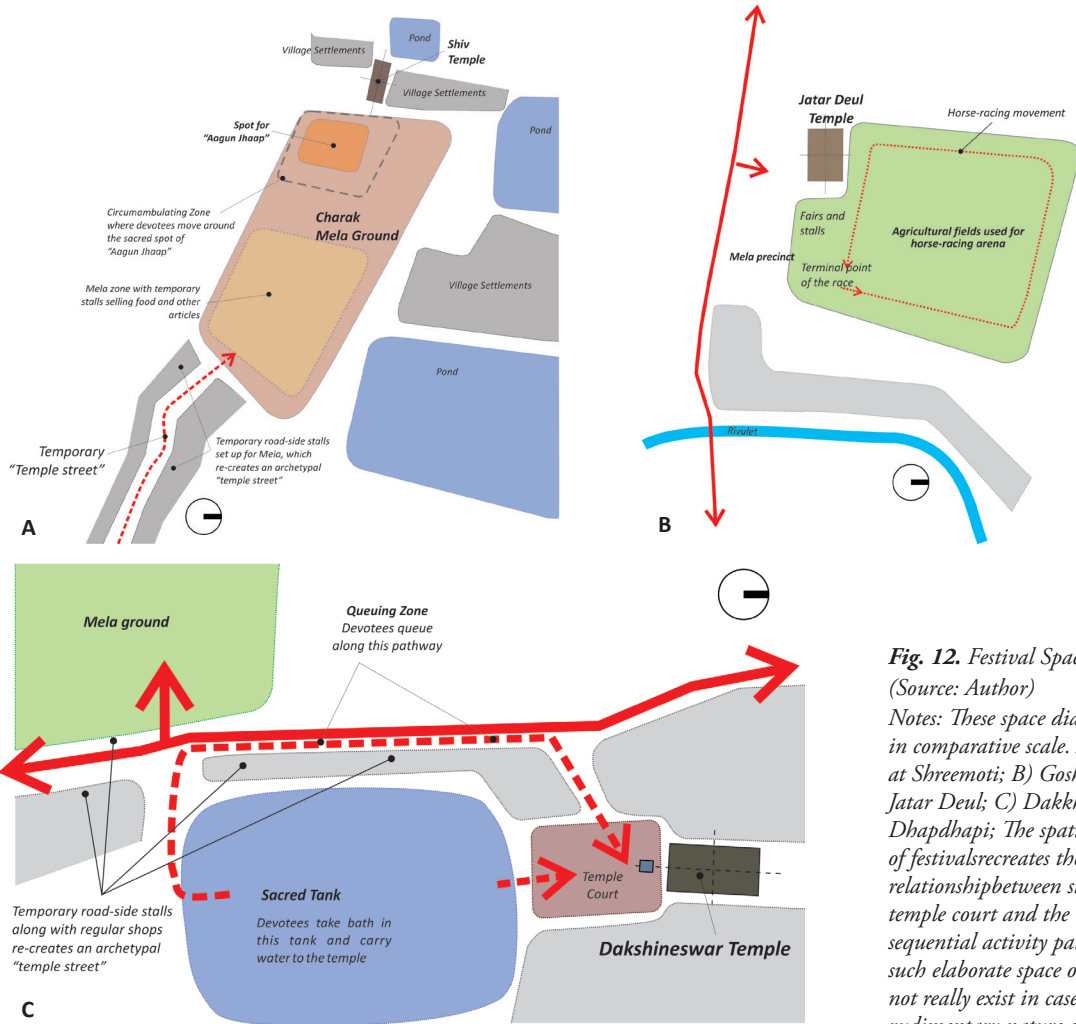
*(Left & Right): Bonbibi Pala (Folk Performance) at Gosaba.*

*Fig. 11. Bonbibi in the Sundarbans.*

*(Source: Author)*

In a larger sense, Bonbibi, 'Protectress of the Forest' is the 'embodiment of the forest itself, cast in a feminine form' (Sarkar S. C., 2010, pp. 46-47; Uddin, 2009).

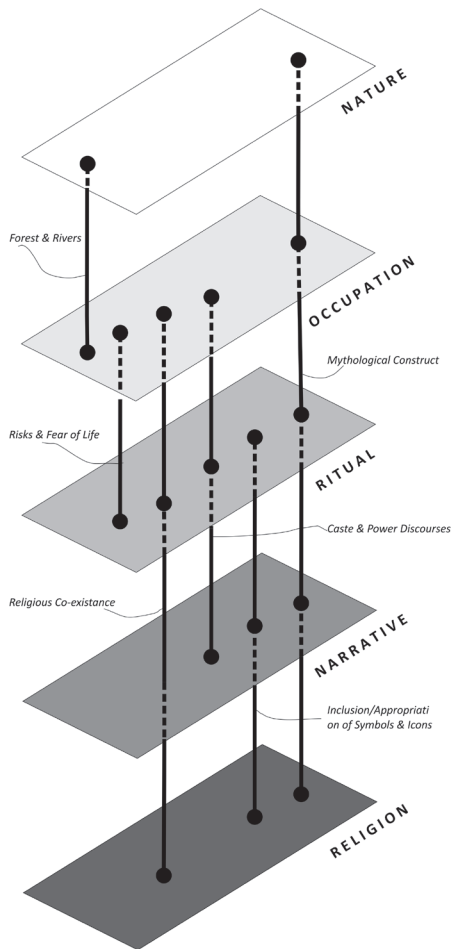




**Fig. 12. Festival Spaces.**  
 (Source: Author)  
 Notes: These space diagrams are not in comparative scale. A) Gajan Mela at Shreemoti; B) Goshtho Mela at Jatar Deul; C) Dakkhin Rai Puja at Dhaphdhapi; The spatial organization of festivals recreates the archetypal relationship between street, water, temple court and the temple and a sequential activity pattern. However, such elaborate space organization does not really exist in case of practical and rudimentary nature of Bonbibi puja.

## Culture of festival

Place-specific culture in the Sundarbans, to me, is the central idea that comes out of its festivals and related discourses. Such a culture in the region is formed by relationships between five key components: Religion, Ritual, Narrative, Occupation and Nature. A theoretical model is proposed here to understand different strands of inter-relationship (Figure 13; Figure 14). These five components are conceived as linked planes, which, as a whole, represent the culture of the place (Figure 13). An understanding of festival contributes to such a formation. These five components are also



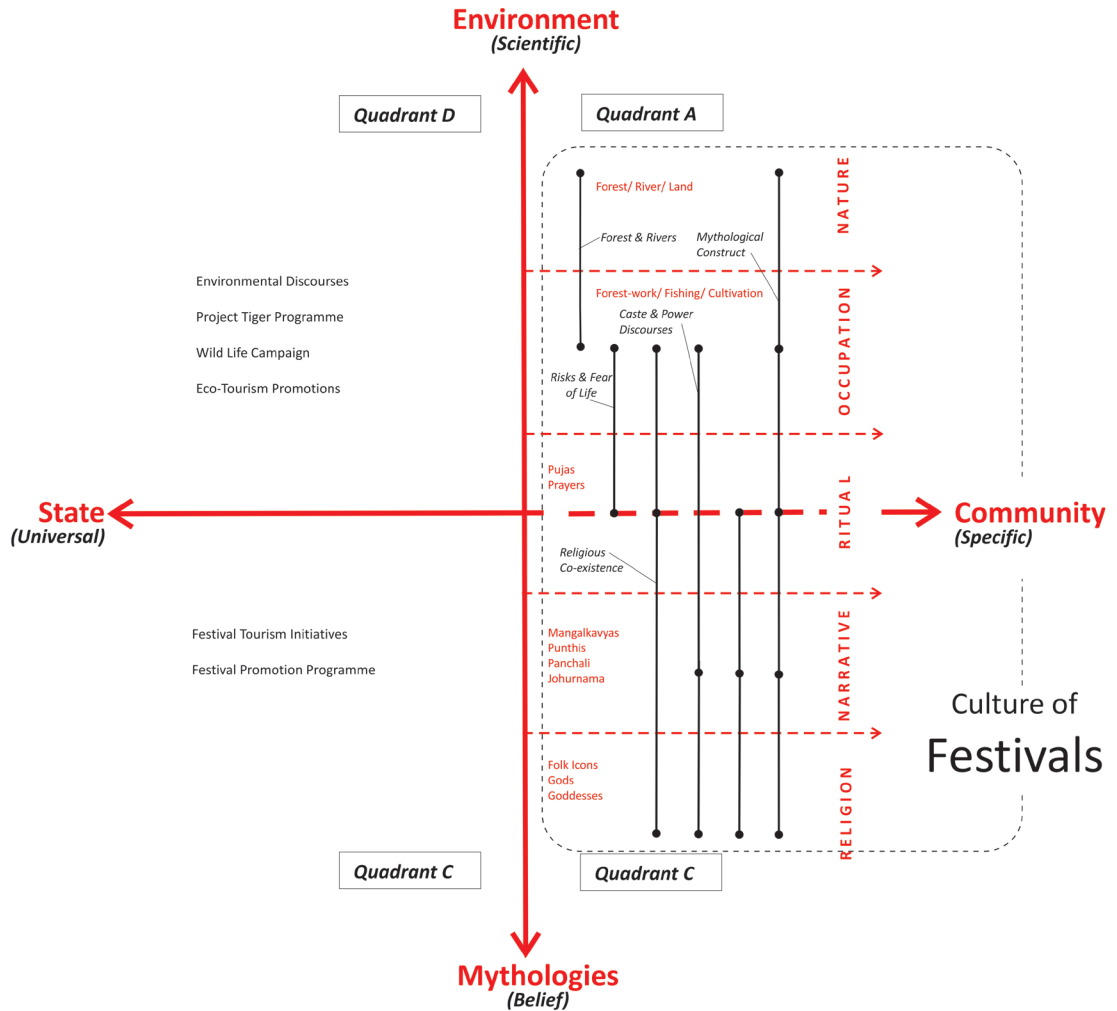
**Fig. 13.** Inter-related phenomena in the Culture of Festivals in Sundarbans. (Source: Author)

arranged as per the Operative Framework conceived in the beginning of this text for an overall understanding of the culture of the festivals of the Sundarbans (Figure 5; Figure 14). Nature and Occupation are placed in the Quadrant A in a common zone between Environment and Community. The position of Religion and Narrative, on the other hand, is in the Quadrant B at the interface between Mythologies and Community. Ritual is located in an overlapping zone between Nature-Community-Mythologies due to the inter-related nature of these components.

For the livelihood, people on ground face life-threatening challenges. They are from the lowest of the strata who 'live on the jungle', like the wood-cutters (*Bauley*) and honey-collectors (*Mauley*). Fishing is an important livelihood here. Besides that, people, usually women and old men (who are known to be physically weak) undertake occupations of *Meendhara* (prawn seed collection) and crab collection from rivers and rivulets of the region. Many a time, occupations provide the surnames and sub-castes as well. All of them face threats for their livelihood, from tigers, snakes and crocodiles in the jungle and the river. Local people, thus, tend to fall back on divine powers to save them from such dangers lurking at each stride taken.

Nature in general, and forest and river in particular, are central to the sustenance of locals here. Paradoxically, it is those very things from what people want to be protected. Myths are, therefore, constructed and rituals are performed for their protection. The belief system assimilated *nature* with their rituals, evident from medieval traditions of plant and animal worship and rituals related to rivers and ponds, rain and harvest, and forest. Various folk gods are included in the Bengali Hindu pantheon, especially in rural areas and in places like the Sundarbans. Besides the divinities discussed earlier, Maa Manasa, the goddess of snakes and Maa Sitala, goddess of small pox, are two such examples where local level fear has created folk gods, rituals and cults.

Inclusion or appropriation of symbols from one religion to the other or icon-making process to spread religious fervour, all underline how



narrative, ritual and religion are connected. Among textual narratives, *Mangalkavya*, *Journama* and *Panchali* are popular types. These narratives, indeed, construct the *culture of festivals* in the Sundarbans on a framework that is pluralist in concept and hybrid in form. Religious co-existence of inhabitants happens for existence. As they go to the forest together, every one of them has to depend on each other and such a bonding cuts across religion. The occupational risk of losing one's own life, make them follow common rituals as well. Such a form of religion is *more contextual than canonical* in spirit and *more vernacular than classical* in expression.

Festivals in the Sundarbans bring out alternative power narratives too.

**Fig. 14.** Culture of Festivals in the Sundarbans. (Source: Author)

Most of the local festivals are of the subalterns. Gajan is 'egalitarian' in its celebration performed by common people in rural societies (McLane, 2002(1993), pp. 87-89). The festival equalizes the society and gives the power to the weak. Dakkhin Rai puja in Dhapdhapi, too, observed by similar groups of people and rituals are extensions of that followed in *Shiv Gajan*. Cults of Bonbibi, Maa Manasa, Maa Sitala and the like, underline the power of women goddess, and are influenced by the *Shaktism*. All these bring out the story of the 'weak' gaining power and, consequently, alternative discourses of power emerge out of new social, religious and cultural relationships.

To end, the culture of festivals of the Sundarbans aptly justifies one of the most inclusive messages I have seen on the walls of Dhakeswari temple in Dhaka, Bangladesh – “ধর্ম যার যার, উৎসব সবাবার” (a literal translation would be: Religion is for individuals, festival is for all).

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