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A Glimpse of Folk Culture and Religion of The Indian Sundarbans

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Abstract

The jungle-oriented people of Sundarbans, in addition to many other dangerous situations, struggle with the tiger in land and the crocodile on water. There is a popular local saying, ‘Jale Kumir, Daangay Baagh’. Due to their proximity to the mangroves and their being under development, these people are exposed to a unique set of biotic hazards – ranging from snakebites to tiger attacks. It has greatly influenced their mindset and socio-cultural frame. The fight against the severity of natural hazards gave birth to magic among the folk communities of Sundarbans. So, magic was practiced as a security measure. The magicians were mentioned in O'Malleys' Bengal District Gazetteer as 'Fakirs'. They are now known as 'Gunin' or 'Boule'. The folk rituals and rites of Sundarbans are closely related to the environment, seasons, plants, rivers, agriculture, fertility, animals, cult, magic, etc. So, the folk culture and religion of Sundarbans may be discussed with their characteristics and peculiarities – Worship of village Gods and Goddesses, Worship of Trees and Animals, Magic, etc. A remarkable characteristic of the folk society of Sundarbans is its communal harmony. No religious conflicts took place in the folk society of Sundarbans. It has been possible due to the worship of folk Gods and Goddesses by all categories of people in rural Sundarbans. Another remarkable characteristic of the folk society of Sundarbans is that the folk culture of Sundarbans is free from colonial influences. The Colonial Government was only interested in revenues and utilization of the forest resources. In this manner, the folk culture of the Sundarbans has remained with its unique character in social and religious harmony.

Keywords: Jungle-related life; Natural Hazards; Birth of magic and mantras; Social and Religious harmony.

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The deltaic land of Sundarbans is situated in the lower Ganga-Brahmaputra Delta, spreading between 21°31'– 22°30' N and 88°10'– 89°15' E. Deforestation of Sundarbans was started in 17701 by Claude Russell, the Collector-General (Colonial Government) of the district of 24 Parganas. During the next two centuries the mangrove forests of Sundarbans were converted to farmlands in 19 police station areas in the 24 Parganas Districts of West Bengal, India. At present, the Indian Sundarbans region is demarcated by the Dampier-Hodges line on the North, the Bay of Bengal on the South, on the West, the river Hugli and Ichhamati-Kalindi-Harinbhangha on the East. Till today, it has remained one of the sections of the least-developed parts of India, and a large number of its residents have to depend on the 'biotic land' of Sundarbans for their livelihood. These people, due to their proximity to the mangroves and their being under development, are exposed to a unique set of biotic hazards – ranging from snakebites to tiger attacks. It has greatly influenced their mindset and socio-cultural frame.

The folk culture of Sundarbans is a very interesting topic in the field of regional history. The folk rituals and rites of

Sundarbans are closely related to the environment, seasons, plants, rivers, agriculture, fertility, animals, cult, magic, etc. So, the folk culture and religion of Sundarbans may be discussed with their characteristics and peculiarities – Worship of village Gods and Goddesses, Worship of Trees and Animals, Magic² etc.

Any study of a jungle area should begin with the study of the culture of life related to the jungle. Because of the primitive means and methods of production, the severity of nature, and the insecurity of life, the tribal people are all equal³. The fight against the severity of natural hazards gave birth to magic among the folk communities of Sundarbans. The hard-working jungle goers were quite helpless against the man-eaters of Sundarbans. So, magic was practiced as a security measure. The magicians were mentioned in O'Malleys' Bengal District Gazetteer as 'Fakirs'⁴. They are now known as 'Gunin' or 'Boule'. The word 'Boule' should be applied to every jungle goer. But now the word is used for the magician. They may be of any religion. They are classified into two groups: 'Guner Boule' and 'Hukumer Boule'. The guner boules are of older origin. They are not guided by any person but by Mantras or Magic Words. But the hukumer boules are guided by hukum or order of some hukumdar boule. Such boules should take the name of their guru in the jungle of man-eaters. There are several types of mantras in the Sundarbans, such as 'Peetu,' 'Kaachuli,' 'Chaaalan,' 'Jaalan,' and 'Lakshman Gondi.' According to the faith of the folk communities of Sundarbans, each mantra has separate meanings and power. Each Mantra has its peculiar function. For example, 'Lakshman Gondi' would not allow tigers into a specified area. And 'Chaaalan' would force any tiger to a direction desired by the Gunin. "Mantras, according to some magicians, are not to be uttered openly in public because they might cause danger to that place. Boules or Gunins believe and remain careful so that no mantra enters a goat's ears. Such practices showed the indigenous character of the mantras."⁵

The hard-working jungle goers in the interior of Sundarbans are always in a panic-stricken condition because the horror of death may suddenly appear at any moment. They know – life and death walk hand in hand in interior Sundarbans. But, despite the danger of death, the jungle goers cannot sit idle at home. They are to enter the forest for their livelihood. The fishers, woodcutters, and honey collectors overcome the fear of the tiger through the application of spiritual faith by way of paying respectful homage to Dakshinray – the god of the tiger. Numerous myths and legends have been created surrounding this man-eater of Sundarbans, which, in the course of time, has been raised to the level of god⁶. The gunins, through the chanting of mantras, invoke the tiger-god and create a supernatural atmosphere that neutralizes the activities of that dreadful animal. Estuarine crocodiles are also regarded as a factor in panic-stricken consequences in Sundarbans. Thus, the jungle-oriented people of Sundarbans, in addition to many other dangerous situations, struggle with the tiger in land and the crocodile on water. There is a popular local saying, "Jale Kumir, Daangay Baagh"⁷.

The Indian part of the Sundarbans has a rich tradition related to minor cult deities, many of which are associated with tigers in some way or the other. They play a dominant role in molding the behavior and activities of the people who take risks in their lives in the jungle to make a living. They are generally worshipped as the folk god or goddess of the tiger. Most of the popular deities represent both female and male forms, such as Banabibi, Narayani, Bishalakshi, Olabibi (all female), Dakshinray, Bara Thakur or Bara Munda, Barokhan Gazi, Pir Mobarak Gazi, Kaluray, Panch Pir, Shajangli, Manik Pir (all male). Besides these folk deities, it should be mentioned of the worship of Manasha, Sitala, Chandi, Shakti, etc. Among these, Banabibi appears to be the deity of supreme importance in terms of popularity. According to the local belief, Banabibi controls the movement of the tigers and thus ensures the security of the people who enter the jungle for their livelihood. Dakshinray and Gazi Saheb are also considered influential with respect to the tiger. The roles of other folk Gods and Goddesses in the Sundarbans appear to be minor in comparison⁸.

A remarkable characteristic of the folk society of Sundarbans is its communal harmony. No religious conflicts took place in the folk society of Sundarbans. It has been possible due to the worship of folk Gods and Goddesses by all categories of people in rural Sundarbans. There are some popular beliefs, such as the worship of folk God-Goddesses of diseases, local saints, etc., which do not conform to either Hindu or Muslim orthodoxy and in which both the Hindus and Muslims join. Muslims are seen for offering to Sitala, the Goddess of smallpox, to Manosha, the Goddess of snakes, and to Dakshinray, the God of tigers. The flexibility of Hindus similarly permits them to worship Satyapir (Satyanarayan),

Manikpir - the God of cattle, and Olabibi - the deity presiding over cholera – all are the God-Goddesses of their Muslim neighbours.

It is a very remarkable fact that the tribes like Mundas, Oraons, etc., have begun to worship these local Gods and Goddesses of Hindus and local Muslims. But, these above-mentioned Gods and Goddesses, like Banabibi, Dakshinray, Kaluray, etc., were unknown to them while they are living in Ranchi, Chotonagpur area of Bihar, and the hilly region of the western part of Bengal. Besides, the tribes have their own deities, spirits, etc. which they used to worship in their traditional manner, such as Dangri, Karam, Tusu, etc. These festivals are observed with great pomp and pleasure. Handia (rice beer) is essential for this. They sing a number of tribal songs expressing their sorrows and joys of life. One thing is to remember that the tribal people of Sundarbans do worship the Hindu deities of the locality along with their own deities. It may be said that the tribes of Sundarbans (Mundas, Oraons, Mahatos, Bhumijias), due to their migration from their homeland long before, have given up many of their traditions. This has been caused by a two-way process: one is environmental change, and the other is influences of the neighboring Hindu population⁹. It is remarkable that, coming to Sundarbans, they have left their most favorite and traditional lives of hunting and turned to being cultivators. So, in Sundarbans, hunting festivals of Phagu Sendra, Bishu Sendra, Jeth Sendra, etc. are almost absent¹⁰.

The folk culture of Sundarbans is free from colonial influences. This is not the culture of borrowing; rather, it reflects harmony and adjustment. This is true in the case of Sundarbans, as ecology and environment have changed the ways of life and culture here. Though Islam is a foreign culture, in Sundarbans, it does not dominate the prevailing culture; rather, it became accommodated here. Colonial Culture couldn't establish its hegemony, and there was no cultural imperialism in Sundarbans. Though there are some missionary activities till now in Sundarbans and the cases of establishment of Churches for conversions, they are not so interested in imposing their culture. The Colonial Government was only interested in revenues and utilization of the forest resources. Like other parts of the country, we find no such cultural imperialism here. In this manner, the folk culture of the Sundarbans has remained with its unique character in social and religious harmony.

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