

Environs and Cults: Tracing the Roots of the Social-Psychological Paradigm of Folk Existence in Deltaic Lower Bengal

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Abstract

The Sundarbans in linguistic Bengal in the Indian Subcontinent constitutes a unique ecosystem. Living conditions in these environs have been riddled with specific bounties as well as hazards. Historical records since the early medieval times reveal how society has created its own mechanisms for physical and psychological sustenance in these natural conditions. With time these have manifested in the form of a number of cults and rituals at the grassroots. They got mingled with higher cultures which came later into the region, giving birth to a variety of significant faiths like those propitiating the Goddesses Manasa, Candi, Sitala and the Bon Bibi - bridging the cultural divides. Review of historical data since early medieval times reveal how these faiths and practices have been crystallized into a cultural paradigm embraced by popular folk society in need of psychological solace in the face of imminent threats of devastating natural and health conditions.

Keywords: Lower Bengal Delta, Cults, Mansa, Candi, Bon Bibi, Sitala

Introduction

The varied geo - environmental systems in the region of linguistic Bengal has had tremendous impact upon human settlement rationale and existential factors. These factors shaped the economic parameters and social practices, leading to formation of patterns of living – in – nature and living – with – nature. The interactions between environment and human existence are often reflected in a critical way through belief systems. The region of Bengal has witnessed the efflorescence of numerous religious cults since the early medieval times.

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As one traces the patterns of their evolution it becomes evident that most of these were geared to the parameters of human existence in given environmental settings. Not surprisingly, these cults were more apparently practiced among the rural grassroots whose life was lived closer to nature in its bare minimum.

In the present paper we shall take a look at some of these cults and their genesis, evolution and interrelation to environmental factors and human existence, especially in the geographical – ecological zone of lower Bengal Delta. Examples of the belief pattern have been selected from those practices that reveal a long historically observed root of traditions in the region associated with the environs and ecology of the locale. The cults of Bon Bibi, Dakshin Ray, Jangali, and others discussed in this essay report were conceptualized within the existential paradigm of the people of the region under study. This project was actually undertaken with the intent of portraying how far natural environment plays upon human psyche to the exclusion of dominant socio – cultural traditions and how this leads to the creation and sustained growth of diverse micro cultural patterns within different ecological zones. Our study reveals the emergence and continuation of a number of rare local cults which are to be found only within this region and which are intricately tied up with the local lifestyle within the given environment.

The Region

The spatial context of this project is bound by the upper stream of Vidyadhari in the north and the Gangetic delta in the South. The east – west span is set within the political boundaries of the state of West Bengal. However, the study spills over to the Padma – Brahmaputra delta in the east when we deal with the historical evidence from the early medieval and medieval times.

The Bay part of this space has been marked as an environmental heritage site (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/798>) of the Large Marine Ecosystem category (LME 34). Geologically our area comprises the mid-Basinal zone to the east of the Bhagirathi-Hooghly, which consists of low-lying alluvial plains comprising deltaic sediments of three generations. One may characterize the zone under study as a part of these three sediment zones.

It comprises of the south eastern part of the intermediate matured deltaic and estuarine sediments of the late Holocene age, known as the Calcutta Formation and the lower most deltaic sediments of late Holocene to recent age found to occur in south 24-Parganas district, known as Sundarban formation. (Bhattacharya 1989, C12 – 17.)

Life in this geo - eco system is extremely hazardous now and it had been so in historical times. Alluvial environments are dynamic, prone to erosions and depositional systems that are constantly changing. The physical appearance and hydrological conditions of a flood plain can change drastically over a short period. A river can change from a braided to a meandering pattern, an arroyo can cut and fill several times, and a river can down cut into its floodplain and create a terrace. All these result into a changing pattern of settlement and constant need for adaptations in lifestyle. Attended with this condition are the hazards of diseases often attaining epidemic proportions. The wet tropical monsoon climate and the saline marshes zone are prone to malarial fever, cholera and pox, scurvy etc. Childbirth is often attended with severe postnatal diseases for the mother and the child. Problem related to hygiene are compounded because of the salinity and moist weather and Gangetic silting as well as the sedimentary heavy clay which allows little normal drainage. In the early historical to the medieval times the region under study has been heavily forested, with the mangrove cover in the saline zone, which spread over a much larger area than at present.

The forest fauna had been a source of concern for human life before the environmental and conservation issues loomed up in the modern times. Traditionally speaking therefore it was the zone of tigers, rhinoceros and elephants, snakes and crocodiles – all necessitating great caution and awareness and all reflected in the belief systems of the local people. Moreover, while the northern part of the region offered subsistence in the form of wet rice cultivation and mixed vegetable farming, life in the lower region was only sustained by the utilization of forest resources, chief of which comprised of forest fuel, honey and a few games. Fishing was the mainstay of food economy. The economic conditions at the grassroots were never very favorable. Livelihood often took the grassroots people into the hazard – prone areas. This has been the situation since Holocene period and human life had always had to adapt itself within these conditions. (Dwivedi and Choubey 1998; Mandal and Ghosh 1989)

It appears from Archaeological records that the Chalcolithic people of Bengal never crossed Bhagirathi to enter its eastern part which was then covered with deep forest and infested with wild animals. But during the transitional stage around (6th century to 3rd century BC) there were sustained changes in the material culture due to advance iron technology. Naturally under more sedentary lifestyle, there would be the demand for more settlement area and new means of subsistence strategies. It was this time and under such compulsions that the people first colonized lower Bengal. Consequently a large number of early historic sites large or small came into being in this area along the river banks having facilities of passage to the sea in response to the growing demand of new strategy. In fact, the northern part of the region under study is criss-crossed by innumerable rivers and channels which formed the network of communication for both trade, commerce and transport. The lower reaches of the Bhagirathi, named Hoogly by the British, and enters the region of Kolkata. The Bhairab and the Jalangi were mighty waterways on account of changes in the land level due to seismic factors and the deposition of heavy quantities of silt in the Bhagirathi. Bidyadhari and Piyali are the two rivers running to the south of Bhagirathi. The other main channels in tidal basin are the Manganga or Baratola, the Saptamukhi, the Thakuran, the Malta, the Gaushaba and the Raimangal which skirts the boundary between West Bengal and Bangladesh in the extreme south. Taking advantage of this kind of situation, the early historic people colonized the area around 3rd century B.C to promote maritime activities. Basically the Ganga delta was the only outlet to outside world in the entire northern India and eastern India. Chandraketugarh, Harinarayanpur, Deulpota, Atghara, Tilpi, Dhosha, Boral, Joynagar Majilpur, Amritberia, Panna, etc. are some of the early historic sites of the region.

While the evidence from many of these sites point to the links in their logical growth and the extension of the Indo Roman trading activity in Bengal during the Sunga – Kushan times it was only with the early medieval times, when Bengal was predominantly under the rule of the Pala and Sena Dynasties, that information on social life in lower Bengal appear to be available in a marginal nature. It seems that there was therefore a slow but steady extension of farming and settlement into the region south of the Bhagirathi since the early historic times to the medieval times. In the Pala records (Maitreya 2004, 15, stanza 31) we get reference to the Byaghratati Mandala, which could be assumed as located in Southern Bengal, although it has not been identified with any certainty. It was definitely placed within the main Pala administrative zone of the Pundravardhana Bhukti in the inscription.

There is the possibility, that the Bhukti itself had got enlarged under the Palas to include South Bengal. If proven right this might mean that the region to the south of the Bhagirathi was included within the revenue administration unit of Pundrabardhana Bhukti in early medieval times. During the Sena rule the Sundarbans region was under a local chiefdom. The region was referred to as Purba Khatika at the time. (Ray 2001, 48) Traditions also reveal the settlement pattern to have been substantially extended during the Islamic rule in Bengal. The history of this penetration has been dealt with in wonderful details in the work of Richard Eaton. A continuous evolution of the local belief system would clarify the close links of the environment and the human inhabitants in the region.

Popular Deities and Cults in the Region: Early Medieval and Medieval Roots

One has to understand the paradigm of regional belief system in this region in the context of Bengal's late entry into the Sanskritic and Varna – Sastric fold. Bengal had imbibed the northern Sanskritic culture within a curiously regional dimension which is illustrated in how the regional culture conceived the purity of Ganga for example. The Bengal Purans of the early medieval times illuminate on how the cult of Ganga was getting a regional shape with the emergence of certain legends connected to the Ganga pilgrimage - locating at least one of the pilgrimage spots in Bengal delta. Richard Eaton speaks about this phenomenon as a cultural offshoot of Bengal's encounter with the Sanskritic tradition, which however remained in the periphery to Bengal's rooted regional culture. He describes, "The river's sanctity lingered on in West Bengal—even today the Bhagirathi-Hooghly River is sometimes called the Adi-Ganga, or "original Ganges"—while the eastern two-thirds of the delta, cut off from the Ganges during the formative period of Bengal's encounter with Indo-Aryan civilization, and remained symbolically disconnected from Upper India, the heartland of Indo-Aryan sanctity and mythology." (Eaton 2006, 20.) Significantly enough the Bengal Puran had claimed a *mahatirtha* of the Ganga in the one - thirds of the Bengal Ganga delta, leaving the two – thirds out of this orbit.

Our study reveals that there were periodic phases of the evolution of specific local cults which coincided with the major historical phases.

For example, the early medieval phase witnessed a certain trend marked by regionalization of some Vedic icons on the one hand and the creation of some new cults from within local practices, on the other. Of the second category we find many to have been a part of the rise of the feminine cult known as Saktism. Of the first category we may take the worship of Ganga river as an example of how a Sastric deity was transformed into the regional paradigm of Saktism. Ganga as the descriptions reveal evolved into an independent Matrika icon, identified as Uma transformed into Bhadra Kali, Mahakali, Karalaksi and tantricised into Tantramayee, Tantragopya, Kapalamalini, Damarudhvani Nrtyanti. (*Brhadharama Purana*, ch 20) This cult is especially significant as it evolved within the paradigm of nature worship. A surprising geographical rendering of the Ganga cult is to be found in the early medieval Bengal puranas too where the whole course of Ganga is described in the form of personified travel of the river through northern India. In fact the *tirthas* were marked on route of this path. (Ibid. chapter 22) The discourse of Ganga as a cleansing and purifying divinity has also been highlighted. We find the ritual of Ganga getting incorporated into a daily regime of hygiene and morality.

The second category comprises of interesting cult developments especially within the domain of feminine cults, which would continue unabated in Lower South Bengal in the times to come but with the additions of the Islamic syncretic overtones and resulting modifications and changeovers. A special case in hand is the deification of the Snake Goddess in early medieval Tantrayana Buddhism in Bengal. Janguli was the Buddhist Goddess with close similarities with the Brahmanical Puranic goddess – Manasa. Janguli had evolved within Buddhism as a part of the tantric *Pancaraksa* cult (Bhattacharya 1958, 191 – 193). This constituted a complex of five Goddesses held as saviours. This goddess was actually invoked as a savior from snakebite. According to Sukumar Sen, the noted litterateur and historian of Bengali literature, the cult of the snake goddess might originally have derived ideas from the great early historic Buddhist cult of *Maha Mayuri*. Now this deity or rather the cult was introduced in tantric Buddhism quite late as we get it in the Tibetan version but its earlier roots are to be found in early historic Buddhist Jataka tradition as a healing charm or rather incantation which the Buddha was adept at. (V. Fausböll 1879, 144 – 148; E.B Cowell, 1990 (Vol. 2), 100-102). Later it was included in medical treatises and this is clear from the inclusion of the Mahamayuri mantra or chant in the medical treatise of Navanitaka, the 4th century CE manuscript of which was discovered from a monastic ruins in Kashgar, Central Asia, the 19th century.

(A.F.R. Hoernle 1908.) Quite evidently a form of this *tantrayana* Buddhist cult was in circulation in eastern India and Bengal. Later on the cult and the deity were both absorbed into the folk life and belief system which was reflected in the early medieval Bengal puranas. (Sen 2001, 156). Even though the *Puranas* represent the brahmanical religion, it is because of their unique role in popularizing Brahmanism that various threads and traits of other religions circulating at the grassroots were absorbed into them. Thus we note the *Naga Panchami* ceremony mentioned as an important ritual in the Brhaddharma Purana (*Brhaddharma Purana*, Uttara Khandam. Chapter 13) Popular deities like *Sasthi*, *Mangal Candi* and *Manasa* cults also emerged in the early medieval times – as evident from the Brahmavaivarta Purana of the 11th century A.D. (*Brahmavaivarta Purana*, Prakrti Khanda. Chapters 13, 15,16, 17, 21, 22). The cult of *Tulsi*, for example basically emerged from plant worship and was integrated into the Vaisnava tradition of the 11th – 13th century A.D. The Brahmavaivarta Purana included a lengthy narrative signifying this process of integration. (*Brahmavaivarta Purana*. Chapters. 13, 15,16, 17, 21, 22) In the Medieval times there was a new upsurge of this cult locally speaking and the great tradition of the *Mangal Kavyas* emerged as a powerful medium for dissemination of the cult of Manasa and Candi both. The earliest composition of *Manasa Mangal* or *Padma Purana* was penned by Bengali author Vijay Gupta of the 15 – 16th century. (Gupta 1970.) It made the boldest claim for a facelift for the cult with a new medium in the form of a new genre of literature. Mukundaram's *Abhaya Mangal*, composed in mid sixteenth century, propitiated the goddess Candi or Mangal Candi – primarily as the deity of forest and the hunting community. (Bandopadhyaya and Chaudhury, 2002).

The sustenance of the cult of the Snake Goddess was due to its intimate connection with the ecology of the region under consideration. It has come down as a popular cult over the whole of the region under study and special ritual objects as well as plants have been traditionally associated with it. The women of the region concerned observe special rites – the *Manasa brata* during the new moon day of Sravana (approximately the month of July), Bhadra (September), Asvin (October) and Kartika (November) months of the Bengali calendar. (Majumdar B.S. 1371, 181 – 184.) In fact, the lower Bengal belief system had closely integrated nature *per se* with their rituals and this is evident from medieval traditions of plant worship, rituals related to rivers and ponds, rain and harvest. The cult of Sitala, a deity propitiated for protection against small pox is another case in example.

The practices and rituals associated with these cults continue to be especially prevalent among the female population at the grassroots in the farming villages of the region. A number of local rituals had evolved, closely associated with life lived at grassroots and at the mercy of nature. The farming economy was largely dependent on monsoonal rain and the women of the farming community practiced the *Purnipukur brata* and the *Vasundhara brata* (Maity 1988. 29 – 34) in the hot summer months of April and May, invoking rains. Our survey has pointed out the fact that some of these observances had had long roots going back to generations of women in the families. Traditions have been handed down on the female line. There is an association of sisterhood and community integration in performing these rites, among the women of farming villages. The women face similar fates and cooperate in the joint effort at, what they believed effective in, mitigating the disasters.

Other cults emerged among the settlers in the khadi (coastal and bay) area which were intertwined with the life conditions of the zone. Quite significantly the cults primarily practiced by the coastal and Sundarbans population are strikingly different from those of the more northerly located farming population. With time major changes were wrought in the conception and practices of these cults and some got modified so much so that they assumed the nature of new cults. This was more prominent among the mixed population in the southern portion of the region under study.

The Sundarbans and the Ecological Parameters for the Development of Cults of Bon Bibi, Shah Jangali and Daksin Ray

The region where our study has been situated is located on the converging point of the above two parts of the deltaic north and south 24 parganas, falling within the Ganga course and outside it. As the main intention was to explore the original and exclusive cultural encounters with the environmental reality at the grassroots we have emphasized upon the southern and coastal part, comprising of the unique ecological zone of the Sundarbans.

The Sundarban, covering about one million hectare in the delta of the rivers Ganga, Brahmaputra and Meghna was the zone which witnessed the emergence of the cults of *Bon Bibi*, *Daksin Ray* and *Shah Jangali*.

As the world's largest coastal wetland, the area is covered in mangrove forest and experiences a subtropical monsoonal climate with an annual rainfall of 1,600–1,800 mm and severe cyclonic storms. Of the 60 varieties of mangroves and mangrove associates that are found in India, the Sundarbans accounts for 50, many of which are rare. Known for its biodiversity, the region has been identified as a World Heritage Site by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. The Sundarbans is the habitat of the Royal Bengal tiger (*Panthera tigris*) and the human grassroots witnessing a slow change – over to agricultural economy and fishery as a living. The environmental conditions pertaining to this zone led to confrontations between human and natural forces on a daily basis. The emergence of the above cults reflects this hard reality. The interactions between human psyche in given living conditions can illuminate upon the curious ways in which environment has influenced the cultural nuances in human society. The genesis, evolution and nature of the Folk cults of West Bengal mirror this in a most telling manner.

The cult of *Bon Bibi* (Jalais, Jan 2008) has been handed down through the generations, through the oral tradition of story and song: the tale appears to have been written down at one point, and at one point is staged as a theatre play, "The Glory of Bon Bibi" or *Bon bibi Johura Nama*, but its transmission remains essentially oral. It may fairly be seen as representative of a certain strand of Hindu-Muslim syncretism that runs through the byways, and sometimes even the highways, of Indian history. According to the story, two twins, Bon Bibi and her brother Shah Jangoli, were born in the holy city of Medina to a Sufi *faqir*. They are marked out for a special destiny: "When the twins came of age, the archangel brought them word that they had been chosen for a divine mission: they were to travel from Arabia to the "country of eighteen tides" - *atthero bhantir desh* - in order to make it fit for human habitation. Thus charged, Bon bibi and Shah Jangoli set off for the mangrove forests of Bengal dressed in the simple robes of Sufi mendicants." Bon Bibi becomes the tutelary deity of the islands. According to Sukumar Sen, Bon Bibi was the Islamized concept of Mangal Chandi or Bon Durga and although the cult had had a prior existence since the early medieval times. Bon Bibi's *Johura Nama* was composed presumably towards the late eighteenth century. (Sen Bengali year 1400. 73 - 82) Field surveys carried out in Kakadvip, Pathar pratima, Mathurapur, and Joynagar in Sunderbans zone as well as in Baruipur and Sonarpur have yielded a lot of information on the cults of Bon bibi and Dakshin Ray. The major centre of the last cult is located in Dhaphapi in Joynagar Thana.

This cult, according to a local specialists in social anthropology (Naskar 2004. 238, 232 – 254.), has grown with time into a regional status. Mukundaram's *Candi Mangal Kavya* (Bandopadhyaya and Chaudhury 2002. Digvandana section. 22), composed in the 16th century, includes the names of deities which would soon become popular in medieval Bengal including those of 'Kalu Ray' and 'Dakshin Ray of Hijali. The former was the anthropomorphized and iconized lord of alligators and, the latter, the Tiger God. Hijali itself is located within the lower active delta.

The 17th – 18th centuries witnessed the theorization of the "*Mahatmya*" or the glory of Dakshin Ray into the *Panchali* (ballad) format just as *Bon Bibi Johura Nama* saw the light of the day. (Sen 1410. 261 - 270) These two cults are intimately tied to each other and to the land and environment where they evolved.

The tradition of rivalry between the two has been mythicized into a legend of confrontations over the question of dominance over the Sundarbans land. Dakshin Ray was he protagonist of Hindu grassroots' foray into farming in the Sundarbans, while Bon Bibi epitomizes the natural wilderness of the region and the expansion of Islamic faith among the non - farming folks in the region. Islam's penetration among the farming folk of northern part of south eastern part of Bengal had already emerged as a historical reality by the time. The contest was narrated in the *Johura Nama* of Bon bibi declaring the final defeat of Dakshin Ray. However, the slightly earlier rendition in the *Raymanagal Kavya* in the seventeenth century (Bhattacharya S.N. 1958) and the *Bonbibbi Johura Nama* – both bear the stamp of *Dakshin Ray's* predominance in the ritual life of the Hindus in the grassroots class in the Sundarbans and outside.

This myth is probably the most illuminating of the paradigm that we are attempting to locate. It epitomizes the gradual expansion of farming into a hitherto wild and carnivore infested area. It also symbolizes the struggle for existence among both the farming and non - farming folks in the periphery of the deep cover of mangroves especially in the medieval times. The cults of *Dakshin Ray*, *Bon Bibi* and *Bara Khan Gazi* (Sen. 1400. 73 – 87; Sen 1410. 261 - 270) entered the formal zone in the late medieval times with the panchali format. The last cult is associated with the bhanti (tidal) life where the forest cover and the sea provides livelihood and takes away life at the same breath. *Gazi*, the saviour from all kinds of natural disasters and diseases and is worshipped by Hindus and Muslims alike in the extreme south.

Mobarak Gazi constitutes one of the most significant vestiges of sufi syncretism in the region and remains probably the most popular among the *Pirs* with the rural folk paying homage to keep peace and stability in their household.

Panchu Thakur, Ola Bibi and Sitala: Death, diseases and Cults

There are some of the other cult deities surveyed in the last few years in the active delta, which draw roots from the medieval times and may also be seen to have evolved from transformed cults practices in the early medieval times too. For example Panchu Thakur is an offshoot, rusticated version of Panchanan Siva cult. Bengal Saivism had itself undergone drastic Tantrification in the early medieval and medieval times. The Panchanan aspect had evolved as a part of this process. But its transformation into Panchu Thakur exhibit the dominance of local factors in belief systems, among which environment was a prime force.

Panchu Thakur is invoked by the rural folks to appease and stop this wrathful deity from harming the children and the unborn foetus in the womb of a pregnant woman. Absorbing the destructive aspect of the Siva Concept, the rustication of the deity had gone far down the popular treatment and was identified as a demigod aligned to the practices of witchcraft. Death of children in these regions usually arose from long drawn fever and cholera, often undetected as to the cause and therefore the conception of fiery malevolent force deriving from the Rudra aspect of Siva with huge open eyes whose eye cast the evil spell.

This cult belongs to that genre which remained outside the formalized cults. Panchu Thakur is generally invoked by the women of the farming community in the villages of both the north and south 24 Parganas.

Ola Bibi is the Bengali goddess of cholera worshipped primarily in the southern part of the south 24 Parganas. Bengalis, both Hindus and Muslims at the grassroots, worship her as the incarnation of Vishnu-Narayan or the daughter of Allah. She is also associated with the worship of local *pirs*. The cholera goddess may be seen as a product of Bengal's encounter with the diseases arising out of environmental conditions. David Arnold cites the early nineteenth century report of J. Jameson (1820, 27, 170 – 175.) in identifying especially lower Bengal as the "homeland" of cholera. (Arnold 1986. 121.)

Naturally this is the locale where the cult evolved and was related to indigenous healing practices. A study of the cult practices would reveal the popular meaning of 'health' and 'disease' within the Bengali grassroots of the medieval times when this cult evolved. The cultural environs of syncretism is important too as it indicates the broad based foundation of the cult. Epidemics and Natural disasters alike brought Islam to imbibe the cultic Saktism of Hinduism. Religious differences were no factor in the way diseases broke out. In fact living conditions and hygiene were significant factors and this marked off the class of people who were most prone to cholera – coming from the poverty line.

Sitala Cult

Sitala, the Goddess popularly worshipped for remission from small pox, measles etc., is worshipped all over the 24 Parganas in the Spring and Summer months from Late March to May. The 1961 Census of India reports this fact and it is still in continuation. Susan Wadley has traced the roots of the cult to the *Skandapurana* of the early medieval times. (Wadley 1980, 36) The earliest *Sitala Mangal* was composed at the very beginning of the 17th century (Sen 1410. 270 – 272). Published narrative versions of the *mahatmya* are available which were composed around the late 19th century. The Goddess had become a part of the *Mangal Kavya - Lokayata* (popular) Mother Goddess category at least since the eighteenth century. Some work has been conducted by scholars on the practice of this cult but its links with the ecology of lower south Bengal has hardly been traced to demographic levels, as is the cult's connections with another of the same kind – that of Jvarasura – the Fever Demon. The last icon is invoked even in the semi Ayurvedic texts of the medieval times. Both are closely related to the ecology of human settlement in the region under study and have evolved through time under the specific conditions arising out of the regional environs. We have been able to identify the developments of numerous centres of Sitala cult which are popularly known in lower Bengal as '*Sitala Than*'.

Livelihood Hazards and Invocation of Saviours: Makal Thakur, Panch Pir and Pir Badr Alam

These are exclusive cults practiced by the fishing community in the coast and the mouth of the delta. These cults are not found outside the zone of deep Sundarbans, especially the medieval east Bengal context.

Makal Thakur is more of a ritualistic icon linked to the fishing community, in a different form from the aniconic cults of the Panch Pir or Badr. The icon is primitive – resembling a roughly made tumbler made from clay upside down on the ground. As Gopendra Krisna Basu describes, the cult figure seems to link it to ancient practices of fetishism. (Basu 1998, 1) The deity is invoked to ensure plentiful catch and the ritual is observed whenever the fishermen plan to cast a net in a big, planned manner. The practice of Makal cult was located by our fieldwork in Canning, Basanti, Gosaba and Kultoli thanas of the Sundarbans

The fishermen from Noakhali have been linked to the *Panch Pir* cult since before the 18th century. (Eaton 2006, 283) The cult had spread into the more westerly parts of Deltaic Bengal in the 18th century and continues today among the oceangoing fishermen. At present our field survey could trace the practice among the fishermen in Canning, Diamond Harbor, Jharkhali, Koikhali and further south, The cult of Pir Badr Alam has a peculiar genealogy as cited by Eaton referring to Temple's early 20th century record. (Temple 1925, 9) Originally emerging in the coastal Chittagong and neighboring Arakan or Rakhang in the medieval times, the cult had evidently spread to the western part of the Sundarbans too and is still current among the fishing folks here while they went out to the sea. The tradition of course illustrates syncretism at its height among the grassroots and supports our argument that belief systems arising out of life conditions crossed the boundaries of formal religion and went beyond to the realm of psychology. Badr was observed by Temple to be invoked by the Buddhists as "*nat*", by the Hindus as an inferior *deva*; by the Chinese as a spirit and the Muslims knew him to be a *Pir*. Both *Panch Pir* and *Badr* were and still are psychological necessities to the fishermen in danger out in the sea.

Conclusion

Historical and archaeological data reveal that the region under study offer a specific set of living conditions and witnessed the rise of a rich local paradigm of faith closely linked to these conditions. This is traceable at least from the ninth – tenth centuries CE in the early medieval times. Life depended on nature and it was nature that men and women fought against using faith as shield. The two main concerns arose out of living in the wilderness and the conditions of health. Conception of deities were conditioned by these concerns.

Thus we have an anthropomorphic tiger deity, a crocodile deity and a snake goddess - whose benevolence could save human life from what was imagined as their vengeance. On the other hand, a number of faiths were associated with diseases like cholera, tropical fevers and small pox – common in these parts and noticed since the early medieval times. The early medieval *Puranas* and medieval *panchalis*, *mangal kavyas* and *brata kathas* were literary mechanisms in popularizing these faiths and practices not only for religious purposes but more as psychological salve against most imminent concerns.

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