

An Empirical Study on the Relationship Between Nature Worship and the Preservation of Environment in Some Parts of West Bengal in India

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Abstract

In India, especially in the state of West Bengal, there is a tradition of environment preservation in the form of nature worship. A study has been conducted, through primary level field survey, among the indigenous people and the villagers of several districts of West Bengal in India to find out whether there exists any relation between nature worship and the preservation of the environment. The author observed that some particular trees and animals are worshiped by the indigenous people and the villagers of this state. These trees and animals were identified as sacred and people started worshipping them from time immemorial. The author tried to identify the different components of nature that are worshipped by the people residing in different regions of the state. The purpose of the study was also to find out whether the identification of sacred grooves had any relation with the beneficial qualities such as economic and medicinal values of that particular tree. The present study revealed that only those trees which have medicinal properties were identified as sacred grooves and incorporated within the religious activities of the indigenous people and villagers of the state. The author also observed that sometimes the religious practices in this region had evolved not out of scriptures but out of necessity and have an important role in the preservation of environment. The author argues that along with the Joint Forest Management programme of the Government, worship of trees has a significant role in preservation of forest in rural areas of Bengal.

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The way of thinking about the natural environment has changed considerably throughout the ages. The various colonial and post-colonial policies, industrialization, and globalization have had a serious impact on the people of India. At the same time in India, especially in the rural areas, there is a tradition of environment preservation in the form of nature worship from ancient times. There are both literary and archaeological evidences which give us an idea about the cultures related to

nature worship in ancient India. For example, humped bull, tiger, and *Asvatha* or *Pipal* tree were considered as sacred in the Harappan civilization is proved by the archaeological evidences of seal found from various Harappan sites(Allchin, 1999; Singh, 2008). Bird, ibex, bull, and *Asvatha* tree were found even in some of the pre-Harappan potteries (Allchin, 1999). Similarly, literary evidences show that *Bodhi* tree (*Ficus religiosa*) or the *Asvatha* tree was considered sacred by the Buddhist (Batchelor and Brown, 1994). The idea of preserving environment by nature worshipping has been observed in the *Kautiliya Arthasastra* (Kangle,2003 :263).

India is a secular country. The majority of its population are the practitioners of Hinduism and Islam. Christianity, Buddhism and Jainism also exist here. There also exist indigenous groups of people whose religious practices are different from all the religions mentioned above. Their religions have certain specific characteristics, although there exists a process of incorporating them into larger realm of the



Fig. 1: Map of West Bengal showing the districts

mainstream Hinduism. Both in Hinduism and indigenous religion worshipping of nature is common. Various types of local cults are found in different parts of India. Majority of these cults are related to nature. The author conducted a field level primary survey among the villagers and indigenous people in some parts of the state of West Bengal (see Fig.1) in India. West Bengal is situated in the eastern part of India with varied topographic regions. There are 19 districts in West Bengal. On the north of the state is the Himalayan mountain range and on the south of it is the Bay of Bengal. World's largest deltaic region, the Sundarban Delta lies on the extreme south of the state. Large part of this state is comprised of the Gangetic alluvial plain. In rural West Bengal trees, animals, rivers and seas are still worshipped. These cults are worshipped as Hindu gods. Once again, their worship is specific to some regions and they are not worshipped outside those regions. This paper aims to find out the different components of nature which are worshipped in rural West Bengal and also to find out the purpose behind these kinds of worship. It has also been attempted to find out whether trees and other components of nature are worshipped for their intrinsic value. The recent perception towards environment among the surveyed people has also been taken into consideration.

Methodology

Keeping in mind the aforesaid objectives, a primary survey was carried out through personal interview method among the indigenous people and the villagers in seven districts in West Bengal during 2009 to 2012. A formatted questionnaire was used to record the primary information. The interviewees were selected randomly. The districts selected for field level survey were Jalpaiguri, Uttar Dinajpur, Murshidabad, Bankura, Purba Medinipur, Pashchim Medinipur, and South 24 Paraganas. The districts were selected in such a manner that varied topographic regions in the State were covered in this survey. Secondary data were collected from published papers, books, reports, and websites.

Results and Observations from the Surveyed Districts in rural West Bengal

The survey was carried out in the rural areas of Jalpaiguri district which lies between 26°16' - 27°0' N and 88°4' - 88°53' E, and is located in the northern part of West Bengal. This district is crisscrossed with rivers, rivulets and hills. Teesta, Torsa, Jaldhaka, Mahananda, Raidak and Neora are the main rivers. About 28.74% of the total geographical area of the district is under forest. Apart from the forest area there are 532 tea gardens covering 31.6% of the total geographical area of the Jalpaiguri district. The district is inhabited by a number of indigenous people like the Rajbangshis, Meches, Ravas, Totos, and Oraons which comprises 21.04% of the total population of the district. These indigenous people were interviewed during the primary survey. The Rajbangshis, Meches and Ravas are mongoloid people (Burman, 2006; 2007; Roy, 2009; Sanyal, 1973; 2002.). These tribes had their ancestral home in Tibetan valley. From there they came to north Bengal through eastern Nepal. The Rajbangshis had adopted Hinduism and they claim themselves

as *Ksatriyas* (Sanyal, 2002; Burman, 2007). The Meches describe themselves as Saivas and worship Siva under the name *Batho* (Risley, 1998). Totos are a mongoloid tribe (Majumder, 1998). The Oraons are not the original inhabitants of this region. They had migrated here in the second half of the nineteenth century from the Chotonagpur region as labourers in tea gardens (Roy, 2009). Living in close vicinity of nature made these people dependent on nature and this is reflected in their religious activities. Though most of them claim themselves as Hindus, but their religious practices show that there exist certain primitive beliefs which are region specific and had evolved through their interaction with the surrounding environment. It has been observed that various components of nature are worshiped by these indigenous people.

The river Teesta is worshiped in the name of *Teesta Buri* by the Rajbangshis and Meches. Teesta, one of the largest river in the northern Bengal, usually overflows its banks during the rainy season. There are 62 rivers in the Jalpaiguri district. Most of these rivers originated from the Himalayas. They have shallow river beds and overflow usually during the monsoon season. Totos also worship a number of rivers, namely, *Mu-tee* (Torsa), *Goa-tee*, *Tei-ting tee*, *Deep-tee* and *Dating-tee*. Cock and pig are usually sacrificed and the worship is done by non-Brahmin local priest. The rivers are worshiped to get rid of diseases. There are twelve streamlets which intercept the Totopara, the inhabitants of the Totos, in the Jalpaiguri district. One has to cross a number of rivers to reach Totopara. In most of the time of the year the river beds are dry, but during monsoon the turbulent rivers create immense problem and difficulties in moving from one place to other. This might have created, according to Bimalendu Majumder, the idea only of the 'malevolent' nature of the rivers (Majumder, 1998). The curses of the river god, they think, are converted to many diseases and for these reasons the rivers are worshiped by the Totos.

A major part of the Jalpaiguri district is covered with dense forests. The important National Parks of this region are Jaldapara Wild Life Sanctuary and Garumara National park. These forests are inhabited by one-horned Indian rhinoceros, elephant, bison (Gaur), leopard, snakes, and deer. The Buxa tiger reserve is also located in this region. During the field survey it was observed that Rajbangshis, Meches and Ravas in this district worship elephant as *Mahakal*. Charu Chanda Sanyal had identified the *Mahakal* as *Siva*, a Hindu god (Sanyal, 1973). Siva is usually called Mahakal in different parts of India and Nepal. However, the present study revealed that the interviewees worship elephant as *Mahakal*. In this region, elephants frequently encroach the agricultural fields during harvest times and destroy the crops. May be because of this reason elephant is worshiped by the indigenous people in the district. Rajbangshis offer cock, Meches offer pigeon and cock, and the Ravas offer pig to Mahakal. Worship of the snake-goddess or *Manasa* is very common among the Rajbangshis and the Meches. Manasa is a non-Brahmanical fertility cult of Bengal, which was later incorporated in Brahmanical or Hindu religion around eight century A.D (Ray, 2005 :489). The practice of snake worship is also prevalent outside West Bengal. Both elephant and snake are worshipped perhaps out of fear

because of their malevolent nature. Oraons worship termite. The reason behind this worship is not clear. Hills and rocks are worshipped by the Totos.

Worship of sacred groves is also very common among the indigenous groups residing in this region. Banyan (*Ficus bengalensis*) and *Pakur* (*Ficus lacor*) trees are worshipped by the Rajbangshis, Meches, Ravas, and Oraons. The Rajbangshis perform a marriage ceremony between the Banyan and *Pakur* tree. Both of them are big trees with various medicinal properties (see Table 1). Different parts of the banyan tree is used for the treatment of tooth ache and male sterility. The bark of the tree is useful for treating menstrual disorder (Bhattacharya, 1979: 55). The Meches worship another big tree called *Asvatha* (*Ficus religiosa*). This tree is used extensively in Ayurvedic medicine (Bhattacharya, 1979: 57-62). It is used for the treatment of burn, infection in vagina and wound inside a child's mouth. The Meches also worship *Siju* tree (*Euphorbia royleana*) as *Siva*. Almost every Mech house in the district has this tree in the courtyard (Fig.2). The leaves of this tree are useful in the treatment of skin infection (Rai, 2004). *Siva* is usually represented by



Fig. 2: *Siju* tree in the courtyard of a Mech hut in Jalpaiguri

Table 1: Sacred groves used for healing diseases in rural West Bengal.

| Plant (family) | Local Name | Parts used | Treatment of diseases | Mode of use |
|--------------------------------------|------------|------------|---------------------------|---|
| Saraca indica Linn. (Leguminosae) | Asoka | Bark | Arthritis | 12g bark mixed with 600 ml water boiled to reduce to 150ml, filtered and the filtrate mixed with 1g rock salt given orally two times daily. |
| | | | Female infertility | 14-15g bark mixed with 600ml water boiled to reduce to 150ml, filtered and the filtrate mixed with 50ml milk given orally once daily for 26-27 days. |
| | | | Heart palpitation | 5-7g bark soaked in 150ml warm water for 10-12 hours, filtered and the filtrate given orally once daily. |
| | | | Piles | 10g bark soaked in 200ml warm water for 10-12 hours filtered and the filtrate given orally 2 times daily. |
| | | | White and blood discharge | 12g dry bark mixed with 125ml milk and 500ml water boiled to reduce to 125ml, filtered hot and the hot filtrate given orally once daily in the afternoon. |
| Ficus religiosa (Moraceae) | Asvatha | Seed | Skin diseases | Grind the seeds to make a paste, apply externally on skin. |
| | | Bark | Deep wound | Ground dry bark and apply externally for 2-4 days. |
| | | | Burn wound | Charcoal made from the bark mixed with coconut oil, apply externally for 2-4 days. |
| | | | Wound in child's mouth | Ground dry bark mixed with honey given for 5-7 days. |
| | | | Vaginal infection | 25-30g bark mixed with 600ml water boiled to reduce to 150ml given externally 3-4 times daily. |

Contd.

| Plant (family) | Local Name | Parts used | Treatment of diseases | Mode of use |
|---|-------------|--|---|---|
| Ficus bengalensis Linn. (Urticaceae) | Bot(banyan) | Bark | Menstrual disorder | 5g bark mixed with 500-600ml water boiled to reduced to 150ml, filtered and the filtrate mixed with milk and sugar and given orally. |
| | | Gum | Increase of sperm count | 30-40 drops gum mixed with milk given orally twice daily for 4-5 days. |
| | | Leaf | Tooth ache mumps | Gum applied 3-4 times daily. |
| Acacia Arabica wild. (Leguminosae) | Babla | Leaf | | 10-12g leaves mixed with 20-25g charred sand and 2-3g catechu (khair) ground to make a paste, warm the paste and given externally 2-3 times daily for 2-3 days. |
| | | Root skin, stem skin, leaf, flower and fruit | Gum Swelling | Root skin, stem skin, leaf, flower and fruit taken together mixed with 8 times of water by weight reduced to one-fourth by boiling and filtered. The filtrate then boiled to make a semisolid paste. The paste is applied to relieve from gum swelling. |
| | | | Female diseases White discharge Muscle sprain | The above paste (about 2g) mixed with 250ml water given 2-3 times in vagina daily. The paste mixed with small amount of water given externally. |
| Euphorbia neriifolia Linn. (Euphorbiaceae) | Manasa | Fruit | Cough | Crushed fruit mixed with sugar given orally 3 times daily. |
| | | Stem | Piles | The tip of the stem after removing the roots cut to small pieces burn in a frying pan to char with small amount of gum of the tree. The char after crushing mixed with ghee to make a paste given externally 2-3 times daily. |

Contd.

| Plant (family) | Local Name | Parts used | Treatment of diseases | Mode of use |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------|------------|-----------------------|--|
| Azadirachta indica (Meliaceae) | Neem (Margosa) | Bark | Mole Arthritis | The above paste given externally on mole. The leaves roasted in fire, extract juice from the leaves, mixed 2-3 drops juice with small amount of milk, given orally 2 times daily |
| | | | Whooping cough | The roasted leaf juice 1 teaspoon mixed with sugar for adults; 40/45 drops for 10/11 years children; 10/15 drops for 5/7 years children and 5/7 drops mixed with milk for children below that age given orally 2 times daily for 4-5 days. |
| | | | Indigestion | 4-5g bark soaked in 150ml warm water for 10-12 hours, filtered and the filtrate given orally at empty stomach in the morning. |
| | | | Wet dreams | 25-30 drops of juice extracted from the bark, mixed with 150ml milk given orally once daily. |
| | | | Liver pain | 1g bark, 0.5g raw turmeric and 1g amla powder taken together mixed with 150ml water, given orally at empty stomach in the morning for 7 days. |
| Ficus lacer Buch- ham (Moraceae) | Pakur | Leaf | Blood sugar | 10 leaves mixed with 5 peppers given orally at empty stomach in the morning for one month. |
| | | | Jaundice | 25-30 drops of juice extracted from green leaves mixed with honey given orally at empty stomach in the morning for 3 weeks. |
| | | | Epilepsy | Extract juice from the bark, mixed 1 teaspoon juice with 2 teaspoon milk, given orally 2 times daily. |
| | | | Forgetfulness | 20-25g dry bark crushed and mixed with 1 litre water boiled to reduce to 500ml, cooled and filtered, the filtrate given orally 4-5 times daily. |
| | | | | |

Contd.

| Plant (family) | Local Name | Parts used | Treatment of diseases | Mode of use |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------|------------|---------------------------------|--|
| Euphorbia royleana (Euphorbiaceae) | Siju | Leaf | Blood vomit | 1 teaspoon juice extracted from young leaves mixed with small amount of milk given orally 2 times daily. |
| | | Leaf | Skin infection | Latex is applied to cure swelling of skin due to cutaneous and sub-cutaneous infection. |
| | | Leaf | Cough and cold in children | 5-10 drops juice extracted from leaves mixed with 2-5 drops honey, given once daily. |
| | | Leaf | Fever due to cold | Juice extracted from leaves mixed with ginger given orally once daily. |
| Ocimum sanctum Linn. (Labiatae) | Tulsi | | Liver disorder and stomach pain | Juice extracted from leaves mixed with honey given orally once daily. |
| | | | Urticaria | Juice extracted from leaves mixed with turmeric juice and sugarcane gur given orally daily. |
| | | Seed | Pain during passing urine | Seed soaked in water, mixed with small amount of sugar, given orally daily. |
| | | Leaf | Cold and fever | 1 teaspoon juice extracted from leaves given orally daily. |
| Aegle marmelos (Rutaceae) | Bel (Wood-apple) | | Diabetes | Juice extracted from 4 to 5 leaves mixed with small amount of honey given orally daily. |
| | | Flower | Vomiting tendency | About 2g flower mixed with 250mg pepper, make into a paste, given orally daily. |
| | | Fruit | Dysentery | Green fruit slice exposed in sunlight and then mixed with 1 teaspoon curd given orally daily. |
| | | Root | Piles | Roasted fruit pulp mixed with curd given orally daily. |
| | | | Heart disease | Ground root (6-12g) mixed with milk, given orally daily. |

Linga , but in Mech religion, which is Bathau religion, He is represented by a cactus shoot. The worship of *Siju* tree is primitive in this region and later with the contact with Hinduism it is used to represent *Siva*. *Tulsi* (*Ocimum sanctum*) plant is present beside the *Siju* tree in the courtyard of Mech houses. *Tulsi* is considered as a sacred plant in Hindu religion. This plant is worshipped in many parts of West Bengal and are usually found in the courtyard of Bengali house. *Tulsi* represents the God Visnu. *Tulsi* also has medicinal value. It is used extensively in Bengali household for the treatment of cough and common colds. It is also useful for the treatment of liver disorder and stomach pain. *Tulsi* has anti bacterial properties (Bhattacharya, 1979: 73-78). The leaves of *Sal* tree are considered sacred by the Oraons. This practice is also observed among the Santals and other Kolarian tribes of Chotanagpur region. *Sal* leaves are used to make plates and bowls. The present survey revealed that there exists a tradition of preserving the environment in the form of nature worship. Trees especially which are worshipped, are not cut by these people. The idea that the indigenous people usually destroy the forest is not true. It has been observed that the trees which are worshiped all have medicinal values. The fruit giving trees are also preserved in this region.

The Joint Forest Management programme(JFM) has been implemented in some parts of this district. Forest Protection Committee and Eco Development Committees are present in many parts of this district¹. The Eco Development Committees of the Dhupjhora region in the Gorumara forest area are functioning satisfactorily. However, the Forest Protection Committees are not functioning well everywhere. But in some regions they are successful in controlling poaching and illegal felling of those trees which have timber value, since, the fruit bearing trees and trees with medicinal values are usually not under threat. It has been observed that besides Joint Forest Management programme which is being implemented by the government, the traditional way of preservation has also significant role in maintaining the forest coverage in this region. The total forest area of Jalpaiguri district in 2001-2002 was reported as 178998 ha (Economic Review 2002-2003) and in 2010-2011 it has been reported as 179000 ha (Economic Review 2011-2012). This shows a marginal increase in forest area, while the total area of the district (622700 ha) remaining the same.

The survey has been conducted among the indigenous people like the Santals and other villagers residing in rural areas of the Uttar Dinajpur district (25° 11' - 26°49' N and 87°49' - 90°00' E) which lies to the south of the Jalpaiguri district. This district has old alluvium soil. The land in this region is very fertile. The net cultivated area of land is 274768 ha which is 87.9 % of the total geographical area of the district. Paddy, jute and sugarcane are grown in this region. Cattle is required for agriculture. Perhaps for this reason the Santals of this region worship cow. Milk and cow dung are also obtained from the cow. Cow- dung is used as a fuel as well as manure. The Santals are not the original inhabitants of this region. They came from the Chotonagpur plateau (Roy, 2009). They belong to a large Dravidian tribe

classed as Kolarian. Santals perceive nature as their property. They do not cut trees because, according to them, this would cause imbalance in nature. They plant trees as a precaution against lightning. Trees are also planted for fruits. They worship trees like wood-apple (*Aegle marmelos*), banyan and *Pakur*. They also perform a ceremony in which banyan and *Pakur* are married. Like banyan and *Pakur*, wood-apple also possesses medicinal qualities (see Table 1). Santals use wood-apple to cure stomach disorder. Wood-apple is useful for treating cold tendency, vomiting tendency, heart diseases, dysentery and piles (Bhattacharya, 1979: 106-110). The villagers and the local inhabitants of the district worship *Tulsi* (*Ocimum sanctum*). The medicinal values of this plant has already been mentioned earlier.

It has been observed from the present survey that the villagers of the Murshidabad district (24°50'20" - 23°43'30"N ; 88°46' - 87°49'17"E), in West Bengal, worship banyan, *Tulsi* and *Manasa* tree (*Euphorbia nerifolia*). *Manasa* tree here represents the snake goddess *Manasa*. Archaeological evidence of iconographic representation of *Manasa* had been recovered from some parts of Bengal which proves that perhaps *Manasa* deities were worshipped in ancient Bengal. But, nowadays, in rural West Bengal this god is either represented by *pata* (picture) or *ghata* (terracotta pots) or by a cactus plant. *Manasa* tree is useful in treating arthritis, whooping cough and piles (Bhattacharya, 1979: 196-202). The district is intercepted by the river Bhagirathi into two parts – eastern and western. The eastern part is more fertile than the western part, because of alluvial deposition. Total geographical area of the Murshidabad district is 532499 ha of which 75.35 % of land is used for agriculture. Cattle are employed in agricultural activities. Cattle worship is very common in this region.

A survey was conducted in Panchmura and Natungram village in Bankura district (22°98' - 22°38'N ; 86°36'–87°47' E). Bankura lies on the western part of this state. The western part of the district comprises of parts of the Chotonagpur plateau and is covered with dense forest. The forest is much thinner in the eastern side. About 148930 ha of area in this district is under forest which is 21.64 % of the total geographical area. Functioning of Forest Protection Committees were found satisfactory in this region. This district is also famous for terracotta handicrafts. Snake goddess or *Manasa* is worshiped in this region and terracotta horses are given to the deities. A place in the village called a *thana* was assigned for the worship of *Manasa*. The goddess is usually represented by snake engraving on terracotta *patas*. The village Panchmura itself is famous for its terracotta handicrafts, especially the terracotta horse. *Manasa* is also considered as a family deity in some of the household of this region. This worship has come out of fear may be because a major part of this district is under forest and the threat from snake may be more than other wild animals in this region.

The district of Medinipur is partitioned into Paschim Medinipur and Purba Medinipur in January 1, 2002. The survey was conducted in both the districts. Both of them are in south Bengal. During the field survey it has been observed that wood-apple,

banyan and *Neem* (Margosa) are worshiped in Pashchim Medinipur district (22°57'10"-21°36'35"N and 88°12'40"-86°33'50"E). *Neem* tree is useful in eliminating digestive problems, jaundice, blood sugar, wet dreams and liver pain (Bhattacharya, 1979: 37-41). *Neem* oil is also used externally as a contraceptive (Bhattacharya, 1979: 41). Cow is worshiped in this region.

In Purba Medinipur district (22°57'10" - 21°36'35" N ; 88°12'40" – 86°33'50"E) banyan, *Tulsi*, wood-apple, *Manasa* tree, *Asvatha* (*Ficus religiosa*) are worshiped. The medicinal values of these trees have been mentioned earlier. Like in some other districts in West Bengal, in this district also trees have a role in the performance of religious vows called *Sasthis* which are observed by the married women for the welfare of their children. *Sashthi* is a fertility cult which has its counterpart in Buddhism as *Hariti* (Ray, 2005 : 491). But, unlike *Hariti*, *Sasthi* is not deified. Her worship is done only by the women and this has some connection with pre-Aryan magical customs. It is interesting that this type of religious worship is mainly done by the villagers, who are so called Hindus and not the indigenous people. *Asoka* and banyan tree are associated with two of the *Sasthis* called *Asoka Sasthi* and *Aranya Sasthi*. The former is performed in the month of March-April and the later in May-June. *Asoka* flower is consumed during *Asoka Sasthi*. This tree is used extensively in rural Bengal for the treatment of female diseases (Chakraborty, 2001). The bark of the *Asoka* tree (*Saraca indica*) has a stimulating effect on ovarian tissues (Bhattacharya, 1979:43). It is interesting to note that both *Asoka* and banyan trees have medicinal qualities connected with female fertility and both of them are used in the religious vows performed only by the married women. The other parts of *Asoka* tree also has medicinal qualities (see Table 1). River and sea are also worshiped in the Purba Medinipur district. On the south of the district is the Bay of Bengal. Some part of the district was badly affected by the *Ayla* (cyclone) in 2009.

The survey was also carried out in the rural parts of South 24 Paraganas (22°33'54" – 21°29'N ; 89°04'50" – 88°03'45"E) which is a unique district with alluvial plane in the north and deltaic islands (Sundarbans) on the south. This uniqueness is reflected in the religious practices of this region. The survey was conducted in both the alluvial plain and the deltaic regions. Sonarpur, Caning, Pathankhali, Gosaba and Basanti regions were surveyed. Cow is worshiped in the alluvial regions. *Babla* tree (*Acacia arabica*) is worshiped in the Caning region. This tree is useful in the treatment of cough, mumps, gum swelling, muscle sprain and female diseases (Bhattacharya, 1979 :223-228). Mangrove trees like, *Garan* and *Sundari* are worshiped in Jharkhali in Basanti block. Jharkhali lies in the deltaic region. The worship of mangrove trees prove that the local people are aware of the benefits of mangrove in the deltaic regions and because of this they preserve these trees in the form of sacred groves. Other than the mangrove, *Manasa* tree, banyan, wood-apple, *Asvatha*, *Neem*, and *Tulsi* are worshiped in the district. *Bono-devi* or the forest goddess is worshiped in all the islands of the Sundarbans. The goddess is usually represented by five or seven small miniature hill like structure. Some time the deity is also represented by a lady sitting on the top of a tiger. *Bono-devi* is the mother of the tiger god,

Dakshinray. The Muslim counterpart of them are *Bono-bibi* and *Bara Gazi Khan*. It is interesting to note that all these deities are worshipped by both the Hindus and Muslims alike. It has been found that most of the interviewees were conscious about their surroundings. The deltaic regions are prone to cyclone and storm. Embankments are created as a protection against flood. Mangrove trees are planted by the villagers to protect the embankments of the rivers.

Conclusion

The present study reveals that there exists a tradition of nature worship in the surveyed regions of rural West Bengal in India. Tree, river, sea, and animal are worshipped in different parts of the state. The form of nature worship is specific to the region concerned and depends very much on the topography and environment of that region, like the worship of *Teesta buri* (the river Teesta) and elephant are concentrated in the Jalpaiguri district whereas sea and mangrove are worshipped in the coastal regions. The varied topography of the region is responsible for the existence of different species of plants and animals. The state is intercepted by a large number of rivers and rivulets. The rivers make the lands fertile at the same time frequent floods cause havoc to human life, especially in the northern Bengal. It has been observed from the present study that the worship of rivers are performed out of fear to keep the rivers satisfied. Similarly sea is worshipped in the coastal regions like in Purba Medinipur district to keep the sea satisfied. Some of the regions of this district were worst affected by the cyclone (*Ayla*) in 2009. It has been observed that mangrove trees like *Sundari* and *Garan* are worshipped in the Sundarban islands. The worship of mangrove means the preservation of the trees. The knowledge of preserving mangrove to combat cyclone was traditionally acquired and incorporated in the religious activities by the rural people in this region because it was very much related to their survival.

Worship of cow was observed in those districts which have vast agricultural land, like in Uttar Dinajpur, Murshidabad, Pashchim Medinipur and South 24 Paraganas. Cattle is required for agriculture. Cow is perhaps worshiped to maintain its population and also for its beneficial qualities. But other animals like elephant, tiger and snake are worshipped out of fear in different districts of West Bengal. Elephant worship is mainly performed in northern Bengal where it frequently encroach the agricultural fields and destroy the crops. Tiger worship is predominant in the deltaic regions in the southern part of the state. The study shows that this tiger cult has evolved out of fear and has been incorporated in both Hinduism and Islam. At the same time it should be remembered that the idea of a tiger cult is non-Islamic. The Muslim population in West Bengal usually consists of those people who were lower in caste in Hindu society and were converted into Islam with the advent of Islam in this region. A majority of them are poor. Survival is much more important to them than scriptures. Snake worship is performed during the month of July and August. This is the rainy season when snakes are found in almost everywhere in rural Bengal. It was observed that though in some areas existence of man is threatened by these

animals, still there is a tendency to preserve them. In many regions of rural West Bengal snake lives within the houses. These snakes called *Vastu Saap* are not killed and are treated as family members. This practice was followed from remote past and is still in vogue in many places. In recent years when tigers entered in villages of the Sundarbans they are not killed. The Forest Department are approached who rescued them and sent them back to the core forest areas(<http://www.expressindia.com/latest-news/Tiger-enters-Sundarban-household-again-rescued/...> accessed March 2011).

Forest Protection Committees are formed with local peoples in some areas in West Bengal for the preservation of forest and this has yielded success so far illegal felling of trees and poaching are concerned. At the same time the traditional method of preserving tree in the form of sacred grove worship is also effective because trees with medicinal and other beneficial values are used to be preserved from remote past and for this no government policy was required. The Joint Forest Management Programme is usually meant for preserving the trees with economic values and though this programme reduced the felling of trees but has failed to eradicate it completely. It has been observed from the present study that the trees which are traditionally preserved from remote past in this region usually have medicinal values. Dependence on traditional medicines by the Indians was observed from time immemorial and this dependence still exists in villages and tribal areas where poorer people are unable to buy allopathic medicines. Their sole dependence on traditional medicines has led them to preserve trees with medicinal qualities. *Asvatha* was worshiped in the Harappan civilization. The same tree was identified as *Bodhi* tree. So the beneficial qualities of *Asvatha* and many other trees were realised by the people from ancient times. These trees were identified as sacred grooves and incorporated in their religious rituals. Similarly, fruit bearing trees are also preserved. Thus, the idea of preserving the environment is not a novel feature of twenty first century's rural Bengal.

West Bengal came under the influence of Vedic culture much later, around fourth century A.D. (Majumder, 2004 : 395). The worship of village deities, local cults and observations of religious vows are part of non-Aryan, non-Brahmanical or non-Hindu culture. With the passage of time some of these deities are incorporated into the Hindu pantheon of Gods. But, majority of these deities are not worshipped outside West Bengal by other Hindus. Again, some of cults are worshipped only in some regions. So their worship is specific to those regions only and are not worshipped in rest of West Bengal. Again, in the religious practices of indigenous people cock and pig are sacrificed. Cock is usually not consumed in orthodox Hindu family. Pork is not religiously acceptable to both Hindus and Muslims. The priests are usually non-Brahmin in tribal worship. Again in some parts of West Bengal both Hindus and Muslims worship the same cult. The cults and practises related with nature had evolved out of human interaction with nature and not out of scriptures. The practice of nature worship had evolved out of necessity and at the same time these beliefs help to preserve the environment. The present study also revealed the

interdependence of man and nature, which is understood by most of the people of rural West Bengal.

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¹The Indian National Forest Policy of 1988, the Joint Forest Resolution of 1990 along with some sixteen state-level resolutions and government orders laid the legal foundations of the Joint Forest Management (JFM) system. The people's involvement in the development and protection of forest was given a legal foundation in the Indian National Forest Policy of 1988. According to this policy the forest community should be motivated to protect the forest. In 1989, a resolution was passed by the West Bengal Forest Department. This resolution formulated an official programme for JFM. It tries to clarify the relationship of small informal village groups to the local government by placing them under the supervision of the land use committee (*Bon-O-Bhumi Sanskar Sthayee Samiti*) of the elected body of sub-district level representatives (*Zilla Parishad*). It also instructs the Forest Protection Committees (FPC) to hold regular meetings, maintain records and elect representatives. In return of protecting the forest the FPCs were ensured 25 percent timber produce in its area and to all non-timber forest products by this resolution. There was also a clause mandating a five year vesting period during which protection must be effectively carried out prior to the granting of rights in the timber harvest, though non-timber harvest products are available from the onset of the agreement. The resolution also empowered the forest department and the Zilla Parishad to dissolve those FPCs who fail to perform their duties (Ravindranath and Sudha, 2004:1-25).