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An ethnographic study of Banabibi Palagaan performers in Sunderbans.

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Introduction

Banabibi Palagaan is a performative tradition practiced exclusively in West Bengal and Bangladesh, and is closely linked to the cult of Banabibi in Sundarbans. The name of the tradition is composed of two words, Banabibi and Palagaan, where 'Ban' is Bengali for 'Forest' and 'Bibi' retains its Persian meaning, and refers to a 'lady', thus 'Banabibi' literally comes to mean 'lady of the forest'. Palagaan on the other hand is an old tradition concerned with performance in the form of narration of verses. While the practice of Palagaan started off as a form of recitation to invoke blessings of the goddess, over time it has evolved as an enactment form with a written script. Banabibi is a goddess whose spirit is supposed to offer protection to the residents of Sundarbans against the uncertainties and dangers of forest life. Another point of interest in goddess Banabibi is her paradoxical character as an Islamic deity in mythical and social-historical origins, and the mixtures of Islamic and Hindu cultural elements in its narratives and symbols over time. (Mandal 2016, Mandal 2010 et al.) Being a folk tradition, Banabibi Pala has survived till the present time with its structural fluidity, in its shifts of representational form with the influence of other popular performative genres and with the advent of tourism in Sundarbans, and, its demand as a entertainment. Our study doesn't necessarily concern itself with the historical analysis of its origin as a tradition or the literary components of its narrative verses but our aim is **to locate the performative tradition in the “present” and to understand**

its importance and departures, and we intend to know how the performers themselves perceive the tradition and its present discontinuities.

Research question and Background.

The fieldwork was carried to mainly to investigate the claim of religious syncretism in the practice of everyday life of performers in the troupes. In the book, “Forest of Tigers: People, Politics and Environment in the Sundarbans”, Annu Jalais argues that the roots of syncretic comradery amongst the performers are so strong that in absence of proportional performance, a lot of performers are leaving palagaan because they fear that the essence of the performance has been compromised (Jalais 2014.) Thus the composition of troupes is one of the major areas of investigation, to find out whether this proportional representation exists or not.

Banabibi Palagaan originated as a form of cult worship but recently it has been more incorporative of various influences from “Jatra”, and other performative traditions, as such has been used by the government to promote tourism in Sundarbans. Another important point of investigation is to ascertain if the “professionalization” and “commercialization” of these performances has altered the participation or the nature of the participants of these performances. How has the idea of the performance as worship and as entertainment has exhibited itself in the perception of the performers and secondly, what are the changes that the performance itself has been subjected to in order make it more lucrative for the tourist’s appetite and does this change lead to any discord in the idea of the sacred for the performers. Further exploring the understanding of sacred, investigations are also carried out to find out the various taboos associated with the performance.

Third major point of exploration is whether the Muslim and Hindu narratives of memory around the performance any different and if yes, then how is this contrast displayed across the two sections. Is there an increasing effort from both sides to appropriate and essentialize the narrative

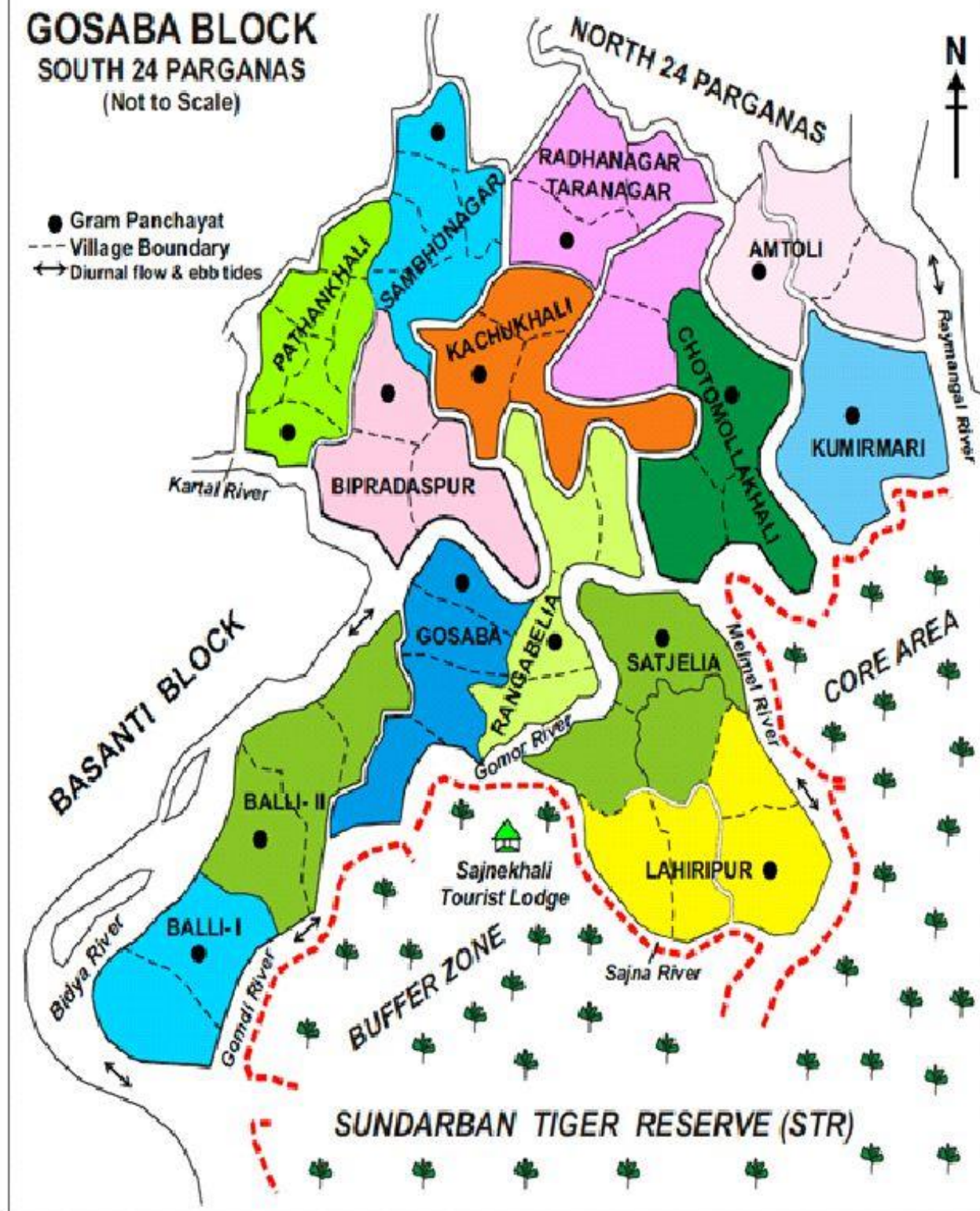
around the deity towards their respective religions and if so does it seeps into the performance and alter the nature of the performance with respect to its former self..

Geographical Location-

The fieldwork was carried out primarily in two islands that fall under the Canning subdivision, Gosaba Block of South 24 Parganas district in West Bengal. The islands are located at a distance of 87 kms from Kolkata and Goudkhali is the last stop that connects the islands to the rest of the country through land. After Goudkhali, water transportation is used to commute within islands. Beyond Goudkhali, the villages are scattered in the form of islands that are connected by a system of waterways and mostly ferries are used for transportation. Based on the availability of contacts, we decided to conduct our field work in two villages: Bally 2 and Lahripur. Both the villages exist in separate islands but exhibit remarkable similarities and contrasts. According to the census of 2011, Bally has population of 6234 of which 3189 are males while 3045 are females. In caste distribution, Schedule Caste (SC) constitutes 49.68 % while Schedule Tribe (ST) were 7.60 % of total population. Lahripur, on the other hand, has a population of 6851 of which 3478 are males while 3373 are females. In terms of caste distribution Schedule Caste, (SC) constitutes 96.47 % while Schedule Tribe (ST) were 0.01 % of total population. In terms of their contact with “modern facilities”, Bally and Lahripur exhibit considerable differences.

GOSABA BLOCK
SOUTH 24 PARGANAS
(Not to Scale)

- Gram Panchayat
- - - Village Boundary
- ↔ Diurnal flow & ebb tides



Bally 2 was located in the interior of an island, and was evidently neglected in most of the development projects. The village lacks electricity completely and transportation is scarce as the only form of road network is a single lined brick construction which does not cover the entire length of the village. As an alternative, the village functions fully on solar power, but this project of solar electrification is taken by individual households depending upon their economic strength and has offered no government support. Thus there is evident economic disparity which is visually on display every night in the lanes of Bally 2. In terms of transportation, walking on foot is most common mode of physical mobility. Cycles and other two wheelers also frequent the roads, although the number is very scarce. Most of the houses in Bally 2 are single storied mud constructions. Almost every household has the kitchen situated outside the residential structure as a separate structure and a pond. The pond fulfils multiple functions as the water from it is used for bathing, washing clothes, washing utensils and even cultivating fish. For drinking, water from hand pumps is used, as the water found in most of available water bodies is extremely saline.

Lahripur by virtue of its location near Pakhiralay, a famous tourist destination in Sunderbans has better facilities in terms of connectivity. The village had earned itself an electric connection a month from our visit. The road to Lahripur is semi-macadamized, although in a bad condition but it supports 4 wheelers. The houses in this village are more elaborate and detailed than in Bally 2. The population density is higher and village life is more active and vibrant as compared to Balli 2. Pakhiray has a fairly vibrant hotel industry that has made it into a popular tourist destination and it correspondingly requires labor and performers from other villages. A large number of number of performers visit from Lahripur visit Pakhiralay almost every day in the tourist season. This interaction with outsiders and dependence on tourists has had interesting implications for people in the village.

Method

The fieldwork primarily makes use of qualitative research and relies on primary data which was collected through a series of semi-structured interviews. The subjects of the interviews were mostly performers and their immediate family members. Along with the performers, some interviews were conducted of people who had been spectators of Palagaan for most of their lives, to get a sense of the change that the spectators have perceived in the tradition. The report will mainly deal with one troupe from Bally 2, Ma Bonabibi Natya Sangastha , and two troupes from Lahripur, Sunderban Chetna Sampriti Natya Sangsta and Maa Shubha Shree Somproday.

Overview of the troupes

Ma Bonabibi Natya Sangastha

The troupe is located in Bally 2 and is the biggest organized troupe in the village. It consists of about 28-30 members, that are vaguely divided into musicians and actors. The performers are usually people from the village and some nearby villages, who come to perform in an NGO called Nature club situated in Bally 2. Our primary contact was Gobindo, who is a senior member of the troupe. Gobindo works as a senior clerk in the local government school and manages most of the troupe. The other members that we managed to interview included Debi Mahato, who was one of the senior most members of the troupe. Debi belonged to the ST community and was a well versed singer. Besides this we spoke to this married couple, where the husband was a musician and the wife performed the role of Banabibi in the play. {FILL UP}

Sunderban Chetna Sampriti Natya Sangsta

Sunderban Chetna Sampriti Natya Sangsta is one of the most popular troupes in Lahripur and is managed by Binoy Mondal. The troupe includes members from different genders, age groups and backgrounds. However, the troupe had no members from the ST community and Binoy Mondal said that they don't intend to include anyone from the ST community because the utterance of Bengali by the ST community is different from them and hence they won't fit into the performance.

Maa Shubha Shree Somproday

Maa Shubha Shree Somproday is another very popular troupe in Lahripur. The interesting thing about the troupe is that it has existed as an all-women's troupe for over last 30 years. It is entirely operated by women, who handle all aspects of the performance including management, music, make up, acting etc. The members of the troupe also hinted at the existing inter group rivalry in Lahripur as a lot of members of the troupe had earlier been a part of Binoy Mondal's troupe. Anuja Adhikari and Nirumpa, which are two prominent members of the troupe were our major contact points and they provided in depth detail about the troupe.

The functioning of the troupes.

Based on the primary data collected from our correspondents, certain deductions could be made about the functioning of the troupes which hint at the functioning mechanism of the troupe.

Performance cannot not be taken up as a sole occupation, and it has to be supplemented by other occupations. The performers in Bally 2 usually perform part time and have other professions that are seen as primary professions. This will be elaborated upon later in the paper. Most people in Bally 2 perform for recreation. In Lahripur, performance is taken up more seriously and occupies a major role in the life of performers. This could be primarily due to the fact that performers in Lahripur have the government recognition as folk artists and receive a monthly stipend of one thousand rupees and secondly due to its location near Pakhiralay, the demand for performance is always high due to the tourist inflow.

All the troupes display a diversity in terms of having people ranging from school teachers, farmers, fishermen etc. as members. In terms of participation, there is no restriction on women performing and men and women perform in the troupes together and even the roles they play are not strictly decided according to gender, meaning that there is an interchangeability of roles across genders. Although, performers prefer to teach daughters-in-laws over daughters as the later tend to move to different villages after marriage. The make-up and costumes are managed by actors on their own. The money earned from the performance is distributed equally amongst all members and no hierarchy is enforced in terms of contribution or importance of roles.

Sustainability of Performance as Occupation

Lot of speculation becomes inactive when we try to study the field in its whole, the overall atmosphere: geographical, geological, ecological and social. The sum of everyday life practices in its synchronic representation and diachronic development portrays the uncertainty in living, in struggle with the inertia of tradition and its ecological difficulties. Singularity in occupation becomes difficult in Sundarbans, as we observed. People in these two places have no single occupation. Here, a question becomes important, whether the performing individual finds palagaan performance as ‘occupation’ in the commonsensical meaning of the word.

To investigate that, our question to them was whether they themselves find it as a ‘pesha’ (occupation/ profession), but as Gabinda Mandal and others said in Bali, they don’t see it as a profession but more off as a passion. Gabinda Mandal used the term, “shakh”, and said that palagaan has mostly been a pastime activity which they genuinely like to do, and enjoy doing it. But they don’t consider it as a profession.

This opposition between profession and passion is important to case in two aspects. First, as mentioned, there's always a problem in sticking to one profession for people in general in Sunderbans because of the vulnerable location it is situated in. With the ban on tiger prawn cultivation a major source of income became unreachable, as many commoners and people from fishing community as well as performers mentioned. "Jangal Kara" (That literally translates into English as "Doing Jangal", broadly it includes going to the inner part of the forest for honey collecting, wood collecting, crab collecting, fishing and other activities in search of resources) which has been historically the major source of living is always full of threats. Agriculture there, is limited to one particular season of the year, that too highly dependent upon the whimsicality of nature. People, who live there, and do not have the migrating opportunity to other possible occupational ventures, are bound to do a lot of jobs for the sustaining of everyday life.

Gabinda Mandal, by profession was a senior Clerk in the local school. Debi Mahato, another senior performer of the same group, is also a daily contact based agricultural wage worker. In this situation, where a single occupation/profession is difficult to sustain, the question related to identity formation in terms of profession becomes dependent upon the process of defining profession or occupation itself as a part of the pre-established identity as a performer.

'Occupation' or profession in our investigation became the category which gives one the major source of money and other material resources to sustain. Performers like Gabinda Mandal or Debi Mahato, themselves did not find palagaan as 'occupation' or the possibility of it to them was still very low. But, others perceive them primarily as performers. While talking to other villagers, investigating about possible performers in the village Bally 2, we got the names that others always perceive as performers. But, that becomes insignificant here, because that does not create the possibility of performance as 'occupation' to the performers themselves. As we observed, performers related to traditional performing genre, find the respected state of identity as performer from others; not so much as the occupational criteria, but as belonging to an existing tradition. Whatever singularity it makes as a community's identification, is based on the criteria of belonging to a tradition itself, not on the criteria of performer's taking up palagaan as a profession. Opposition between profession and passion in these case is then becomes blurred on the belonging to a tradition of folk performance. Whether or not performers themselves perceive the possibility of performance as occupation, it does not disturb their belonging as a performer in the other's mind.

Second, Lahiripur has seen more development in tourist industry than Bally 2. Performers there from different group (both Binoy Mandal and Anuja Adhikary) said that they get regular invitation during the tourist season, and occasionally from state sponsored functions. A regular performance for tourists is earning fifteen hundred to two thousand rupees or more, as the performers said. In Lahiripur, as we saw performers had the possibility of earning through

performing, thus considering performance as occupation came out as a possibility there, from the part of the performers. While, in Bally 2, due to the lack of this scope, considering performance as occupation was not visible from the performers. At the same time what we observed in Lahripur, is a competitive rivalry among groups. As, there has been an atmosphere of newly forming groups due to the demands from tourists, there is also emerging rivalries for meeting those needs. While, we were talking to the two group members in Lahripur, the intergroup rivalry was prominent.

Groups in Lahripur, Lahripur have been recognized by the West Bengal government, individuals get a monthly stipend as folk artists (we have attached a photograph of a performer's identity card). The group in Bali 2, and its members have not been recognized yet by the government as "folk artist", although they have performed in presence of state dignitaries and revived informal rewards. Consideration of performance as occupation also thrives on this official recognition from the part of the government.

Changing forms of performance:

The nature of the performance has bifurcated to retain two primary forms- one that is done for the puja and the another one performed for the tourists. the performers revealed that ideally the text supports a five to seven hours long pala, it can be extended further, and is performed usually throughout the night. But, while performing for the tourists, they perform for half an hour to one hour- comprising the main events of the script.

A full length pala is frequently performed during "parban" (i.e. Makar Sankranti, most frequently), or as a "manasik" pala. Gabinda Mandal said, "Manasik pala" is when somebody or a family promised to the temple for a sacred doing, and a pala is called for to meet that promise. The performance for the tourists takes places much more frequently and the performance is compressed to a shorter time. Performers themselves do not see these two representational difference as dichotomous, but it is clear on their mind according to the end goal of the performance itself. Obviously there has to be a difference in terms of content, but performers do not see this radical shift in content as a process of decline. The performance for the tourists is treated like a non-sacred event and a profane day to day event, as such the performers do not consider the shorter performance as desacralizing the goddess. As mentioned, there is a clear end goal, separated while performing for tourists. As content analysis is not part of this study and a limitation of our project, we could not dwell into the details of the same. We shall see how performers themselves see these changing representations in terms of practising rituals around performances.

Rituals around performance: the sacred body.

As data collected from both these villages show, performers follow certain rules forming the ritual of the performance: that separates their attitude to performance for 'Puja' and for tourists. Gabinda Mandal and other group members said that taking bath, not eating meat are certain rules they maintain for rituals. The menstruating women performers are also avoided during "Manasik" pala. But, these norms are not followed during a play for tourists. In conversation with Gabinda Mandal, he said "kharap lage" ("does not feel nice") to not maintain these rules, but while performing for tourists there is no need or space for this. "Pyala tola" which is an activity of collecting money from spectators, in form of "bhikkha" during the performance is also something performers in Bali 2 do not perform while entertaining the tourists.

Gabinda Mandal's argument was performing "pyala tola" which implicates directly asking for money may hurt the spectators who have come and joined there during vacation. Though, "Pyala tola" has been a part of the ritual traditionally, they negate this part from content and performance while performing for tourists. But, when we talked to Nirupama and Anuja Adhikary and other women performers in Lahripur/ Lahiripur they said that they do perform "Pyala tola" even while performing for the tourists. As, Nirupama said that it is an essential part of the content of the play, to supply the very demand of narrative they even perform "Pyala tola" while performing for tourists. While, at the same time, groups in Lahripur also separate performance for tourists and for "parban" such as Sankranti separately in terms of following rules and taboos.

There is a clear separation of performance as sacred and the non-sacred. And the body of the performers become the carrier of these sacred symbols. When, bathing or not eating meat, and avoiding menstruating women are signifiers of demanding "purity" of the performers' body.

What we see that the separation of the sacred and the non-sacred becomes important here, in terms of performers themselves perceiving the two separating forms of performances. In conversation with Nirupama and Anuja Adhikary we got to know that the all women group often performs a symbolic replication of "ghat sthapana" while performing for the tourists. That is a process of inaugurating the performance with worshipping the goddess before the play. "Pyala tola" and "ghat sthapana" in tourists' performances indicates a (re) externalization of sacred symbols in non-sacred scenarios in its replica, but, at the same time it becomes important to sustain the narrative from its textual and traditional content in a new mode of representation.

"The life of struggle can cope with any stage":

As mentioned, in the new spheres of representation and performance, the physical space where the performance is carried out e.g. the stage becomes important. The performers have had to adopt to changed spaces for performance as well as changed audiences. Firstly, the nature of the spectators is entirely different in tourists' performances. Gabinda Mandal said that they mostly encounter a set of people from urban areas and often from a different language group than Bangla. When they go to perform in front of a set of audience who are alien to the nature and content of the play, the performers circulate a page of written summary of the play in English, with the help of the organizing tourist agencies, NGOs or resorts.

With the shift in the formation of the audience or the spectator, there is also a shift in the stage of the play. In traditional scenarios, the performance is in an open space, while the stage is open towards audience in forward, leftward and rightward direction (as performers reviled). For tourists, performers have to perform in either a closed hall, or in winters around a campfire or in tourist boats. This hampers the movement of the performers across the stage as such various mechanisms are used to overcome these shortcomings. An in-depth systematic study of the could not be done here, but our area of investigation was whether the shifting areas both in terms of spectator and especially stage influence on the declination of a traditional form in performers' perception.

Gabinda Mandal said that there is always a restriction in fluidity in terms of movement while performing inside or in a limited space. But, that has become a necessity for adjustment. Women's group in Lahiripur said that they don't care for these limitations. As a member, Anita Mandal summed up beautifully,

“Lorai kore je jibon, se jekono stage'ei maniye nite pare.”

(“the life of struggle can cope with any stage”)

Everyday life in Sundarban is itself a theatre of continues struggle. And what this life experience teaches is the courage to transcend the textual limitations. That we think creates the space for temporality of a tradition in new modes of necessary representations. More than concerning a declination or shift from what is textual or traditional, what has been important for the performers in the opportunity to perform more often, that from there area of enjoyment or passion, at the same time a possible source of income and exposure to a new set of spectators.

Here, we'll retell a story of a performer from Binay Mandal's group, in Lahirpur. Shibapada Mandal, a middle aged young man had an encounter with crocodiles when he went for honey collecting in the Jangal, roughly twelve years ago. He was badly injured. After years of treatment, now he can walk with a stick. Hardworking jobs for him is not permitted, neither he has the physical strength for other jobs anymore. He has been a performer throughout, and now Palagaan has become his only space for activity and labour, source for livelihood. Ironically, he

plays the role of Dakkhin Ray, the tiger. This individual performer's biography here tells us the story of struggle in everyday life and its manifestation as well as refuge in performance.

The problem of utterance and school education:

Mastarmashai, the senior most member in Binay Mandal's group told us that they don't include anybody from the ST communities as performers. The reason he gave us is that, the way people from the ST communities utter the language Bangla is not same as theirs and the audience might find it problematic. Mashtarmashai who himself migrated from Bangladesh and settled in the village traced back this problem of utterance with the displacement of scheduled tribe communities in the village from Jharkhand and western border areas of Bengal such as from districts like West Medinipur. But, this logic on the problem of utterance is not found in Anuja Adhikary's words. As, the girl Riya Sardar who performs the role of Dukhey (A major character of the play) belongs to the scheduled tribes. But, Anuja Adhikary said about the influence of school education and kind of impact it has towards a homogenisation in uttering a language in particular way, this influence negates the problem of utterance for her.

In the other scenario, Debi Mahato has been a performer and singer throughout, she belongs to the scheduled tribes, but in Gabinda Mandal's Ma Banabibi Natya Sangastha, there never occurred a problem on the ground such as utterance. The impact of school education does not work in Debi Mahato's case, as she herself said. While investigating about the possibility of segregation in terms of caste amongst the performers, Debi Mahato told us that there never has been any such separating in her career of performance. The classical dichotomy of purity and pollution has been there in spatial movements and touching in the sphere outside of performance, as in everyday life. But, Debi Mahato's view suggests that this separation has also become less emblematic over time, in the ground of caste.

In Lahripur, there is a spatial arrangement of residence in the village in terms of SC and ST communities. But, fluidity in movement or accessibility to common resources (such as water) is not embodied in day to day living. At the same time, Mastarmahai's argument in terms of utterance places the ground of symbolic and nominal differentiation in terms of caste separation and othering, in localised memory of social entities.

Banabibi – The goddess and the cult.

The presence and prominence of goddess Banabibi in the lives of the people of Sunderbans can be gauged from the visibility of Banabibi temples throughout Sunderbans. The goddess forms an important part of their everyday and conscience. The temples were diffused throughout the villages, and even in compounds of certain households. While a variety of other gods and goddesses are also worshipped, the dependence on Banabibi remains constant as she is believed to be the protector against the dangers of the forest life. The Banabibi temples that are present do not present a homogeneity either in terms of number, nor in terms of the structure of temples or the idols. The number of temples in Bally 2 is lesser than the number of temples found in Lahripur, this can be attributed to the population density. Regarding the form and structure of the temple, they differ from temple to temple. This difference is evident in the varying number of statues present in each temple as well as the varying importance given to each idol in the temple. This indicates that the cult around Banabibi doesn't associate itself with strict ritual adherence. An example of this is seen in the dispute over importance of the idol of tiger in the temple. A new narrative is doing rounds as was explained by Debabrata, that the presence of tiger under the feet of Banabibi is contradictory to her nature of a loving mother. This narrative surprisingly invokes no strong reaction as most people don't seem to care for the presence or absence of certain idols.

The lack of ritual rigidity and the presence of idols which are not strictly religious like that of the Ghazi, whose appearance makes him look like an Islamic figure (However, his muslimness is a disputed issue) can be taken as a sign of the memory of a syncretic social. Infact, a Banabibi temple in Lahripur had a picture of Kabba and Medina inside the temple, and the pujo was performed by a Hindu priest who was referred as the Maulvi. Interestingly, the Maulvi would dress like a Muslim before performing the pujo.

Who wants to perform?

Investigating about peoples' involvement and enthusiasm to perform we got a mixed view which leads to certain possibility of separate arguments as well as we found certain structural similarity. In both these villages and in different groups what we observed is that participants are connected to the performing tradition of Banabibi Palagaan or similar performing tradition through kin members. Archana Sarkar, a member of Ma Banabibi Natya Sangastha in Bali 2, took up performance after her marriage and when she shifted to the village. But, even before her

marriage she used to perform “Kirtan” with her father. She married her music teacher, and both of them now perform in the same group.

Very unusually there have been instances of a person joining the group, who is not connected or introduced to performing genres by their kin members. As is the case of the youngest member of Binay Mandal’s group, the boy studies in class seven, and not any of his kin members are into any kind of performance. Another structural similarity is the groups’ inclination towards teaching and incorporating married women from the same village. As unmarried women are supposed to marry and leave the village in most of the cases, their hard work of teaching will not be useful in their own groups’ future.

In terms of incorporating new members and peoples’ enthusiasm Gabinda Mandal had the view that people want to join, but often they don’t have enough space in the group to incorporate them, Debi Mahato said that youth do not want to join, because they have been exposed to other work spaces through school education and either leaving villages for better work options. Debabrata Mandal, who is also the secretary of the youth club told us about the lack of enthusiasm from their part to perform Banabibi Palagaan. One argument about these lack of enthusiasm that we perceived talking to villagers other than performers, is the absence of contemporary events in these performances. Constant repetition of the same story becomes monotonous especially for the viewers within the village, who after witnessing a performance a couple of times lose interest in it. The idea of contemporary and its inclusion in traditional performative form sparks another dimension of investigation for further study.

Syncretism “Anaek dur”?

A major area of investigation for our research was to inspect the validity of claims of syncretism in the tradition. However, both the villages where our fieldwork was conducted were fully Hindu villages and on asking about the whereabouts of Muslims, a constant voice echoed that they live “Anaek dur”. In such an extreme case of absence of the other, it becomes difficult to argue that syncretism in fact does get manifested through the performance. However, the presence of its syncretic history gets manifested *in* the collective memory and conscious effort of not negating the Islamic elements of the performance. The Muslim elements of the performance, be the Muslim characters, iconography or the usage of Islamic terms in the narration have been preserved and no effort has been made to create an “essentialized Hindu myth” out of the tradition. However, one of the performers, Anuja said obviously some Islamic words which have no usage in the speech anymore might get changed while performing mostly because audience as cannot understand them.

Conclusion

Our experience in the field challenged the assumptions that we had entered the field with. Our imagined conception of a syncretic community was not met with, due to the villages be entirely Hindu villages, but the existence of syncretism in non-negation of an existent history of was very visible. No attempts were made to corrupt or manipulate the Islamic linkages of the tradition and mostly because they were not perceived to exist in opposition with the existing ideals. In face of the extreme uncertainties that the life in Sundarbans is faced with, in terms of unpredictability of nature, and animals, the emphasis in the social life seems to be on facilitating convenience. That is one possible explanation that in our brief stay we did not encounter cases of any unwarranted gender, caste or class discrimination. the troupes that we investigated presented a microscopic picture of the overall social structures in the area, and in the constant battle against nature, the role of social life seems to provide a sense of security and stability. And the internal organizations within the troupes were also indicative of the same. Lack of gender discrimination, lack of hierarchical oppression, egalitarian distribution of monetary and other benefits all indicate the attempts at establishing a form of social life which takes into consideration the convenience of all the members participating.

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Pictures from the field



A. Ferries should for transport across islands.



B. A Banabibi temple in Bally 2. The figure next to Banabibi is Ghazi.



C. Members of the all women's troupe looking at their recorded performance.



D. The road leading to Gobinda's house in Bally 2.



D. Gobinda's house in Bally 2.



E. Identity cards given to folk artists by govt. of West Bengal. Card of a performer from Binoy Mandol's troupe in Lahripur.