

Q: How did the environment and geography have an influence on the social, economic, and cultural aspects of East Bengal?

Ans: Since we had monsoonal climate and our crops and livelihood depends on nature. We are the believer of absolute power. In this context the concept of worshipping goddesses Kali and Durga can be considered to be derived from the concept of omnipotence of nature.

God and Goddess: In our everyday economic activities, we ask for our safety and wellbeing from God and Goddess. It can be observed from the Veda, Purana and other ancient sculptures that Bangali Hindu society were the worshipers of different Gods and Goddesses and these were correlated to nature. For example, Hindus summoned goddess Ganga, Durga and Kali as their mother. Hindu fisherman pray to Ma Ganga 'not only for helping them make a good catch but also for keeping them safe while they are fishing.' Annual dipping in Langalband(near Dhaka where Ganga and Brahmaputra river mixed) signifies the spiritual connection to water. By dipping in the river they believed that this will not only wash their dirt but also remove their sins and make their soul pure. Few days ago, the same type of event also happened in India's Mahakumbh mela.

Among muslims, there were also beliefs in the society. They believed in various pir and other personalities. On the first fishing voyage of the season, they say their prayer to Allah and arrange milad. They also took blessings from spiritual personalities by offering shirni as well as donations to darga for their safety. Khaja khizr was one of the most prominent personalities in Bengali Muslim mythology. He was regarded as the 'water-saint'. He is considered to be still alive and is believed to be so he met Prophet Nuh (AS) during the Great Flood. He is also famous for providing protection from ship-wreck. Still today, there exists the practice of burning lamps in his honor in the Buriganga river.

Diseases: Our climate is very hot and humid. So, people have to suffer from various diseases like inflammatory fever, paralysis and sudden attacks of cholera. It was estimated that one fourth of total annual deaths occurred in this month. Animals also fall sick and die. So, meat supply

gradually decreased. Bhadra is the month of very hot as well as extremely humid in Bangla. It starts from the mid-August to mid-September. So, people avoid going out during this time.

Foods: Due to extreme heat, people reduced their consumption of the food rather they started to drink different fluids like sherbat, sugar water, and unripe coconut juice etc. Among these, there was a very popular drink called Nalta Pat or Jute juice. They usually drink it in the morning as it is believed to have a 'cooling and mild tonic effect' as well as digestive power.

Houses and Clothings: In order to keep their house cool, they used to build their houses with mud, straw, dry leaves, wood and bamboo. It helps to maintain well ventilation as well as privacy. Cotton fabric is best suited to the hot and humid weather of the land. So, they used to make their clothes with cotton fabrics like shari, dhuti, punjabi-pajama which were used universally. During that time, Bengal was famous for muslin. It has given rise to indigenous textile industries which have accommodated workers from all traditions, Hindu, Muslim or indigenous people.

Wedding: December-January is the proper season for weddings. The groom's party can easily go to the bride's house and stay there.

Bazaar: Bazaar is a special feature of public life in Bangladesh. It is not only a place for material exchange but also a place for reproduction of cultural, social as well as political traditions and activism. Bazaars were used to set up near rivers or any kind of water bodies.

Forest and Bonobibi: Forest has been a special site for the meditating sadhus and sufis; this has been a place for bonoprash or place of retirement of ordinary husbandmen. There is a famous story about Bonobibi. Bonobibi was abandoned in the Sundarbans after birth and by the will of Allah, she was raised by a deer. People believed that she was filled with magic to turn into a goddess who used to help the vulnerable visitors to the Sundarbans. Villagers visit the forest to collect honey and timber. They

took gunin a holy man, who continuously recite tantra-mantra for their protection from Bonobibi.

Agriculture: Agricultural practice depends on indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples were good at agricultural activities. Some of their activities are uses of bamboo sticks or tree branches for insect control, the sprinkling of cattle urine or spreading of tobacco dust to pest control, and applying ash and poultry wastage in the vegetables to provide nitrates. They also used to plough their lands early in the morning to moisten the soil with falling dew drops. There are records of 52 techniques and associated tools used by these tribal people.

From the beginning, we have been intimately connected to nature. We use lands for agricultural purposes, forests for collecting resources, rivers for our transportation and so on. People feel so connected to nature that even natural things are named as if nature has a personality. The Sundarban means ‘the beautiful forest’, Madhumati represents ‘gentle’ river, Bhairab represents ‘dreadful’ river and so on.

“Oh rain, come in profusion, and we will donate paddy produced thereafter with equal proportion” signifies the close relations between human and nature.