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Omar Faruque

Grassroots Views on Health Practices, Changes in Health Behaviour and Policy Means for Health Communication in Bangladesh

Mohammad Mainul Islam

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Mozammel Haque Neogi

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Editorial

Bangladesh is an underdeveloped country where sociology is also an underdeveloped discipline although the first one is not the exclusive cause of, or entailed, the second one. Therefore, development of Bangladesh is not a precondition for development of sociology itself rather development of sociology - for many reasons, is necessary for the development of the country. Sociological knowledge itself cannot play the decisive role of developing the society itself as the sociologist does not have any secret art or tactics for that, but can significantly contribute to find out certain ways and means to propel the country towards development.

In Bangladesh, sociologists are often regarded for their potentials rather than their accentuated achievements, which is partly because the society is a traditional one where ascriptive role is still pre-dominant in almost every sphere of life and where even a professional counts prestige more important than self-contribution to the society. Despite that an emerging trend of transition in the society from tradition to modernity is evident in almost all spheres of life where concomitant variation is also observed in many sectors of the society. Thus sociologists, although once enjoyed a full privilege without pursuing any significant intellectual work, have a reason in coming days to apprehend that they will not enjoy such privileges unabatedly without changing their present trend of marginal accomplishment. With the growing demand for social researches and to keep pace with the demand of the new millennium - the sociologists have to undertake researches in many fields including the fields where needs for applied research are burgeoning day by day. Therefore, the present state of sociologists would not allow the professionals to remain inactive in coming years. And to meet the challenges of the new millennium or post modern society, there should be opportunity for publications of research findings as without that the inspiration for sociologists would not remain strong here, and moreover it will be despairing for them as without that their findings will perish.

Intellectual pursuits without having scope of publication(s) cannot be sustained in a society for an indefinite period, which perhaps also entail a poor performance of the sociologists of the country in addition to causing other major or minor limitations. The present initiative is, therefore, to create an opportunity for and to remove the entrenched disadvantages of the sociologists - disadvantages they have been, as they were facing over the last five decades.

It is not a matter of complacency to have scope for publications of articles prepared on different aspects of social researches, perhaps, it is also equally important to adhere to pursuing high quality research to gradually compete with the changing world, where many other countries have superseded us in respect of number and quality of social researches. Therefore, time has come to wake up and propel social researches with all enthusiasm to cover the lost decades and for that matter to add to the vehicle of the same. I am confident that the trained sociologists of the country are fully aware of the fact and are ready to face the challenges that are ahead of them.

I, therefore, would like to urge upon the sociologists of the country to come up with a mission to undertake social researches here in Bangladesh with paramount quality and increased quantity. Everybody's will and zeal can together bring the success much faster than what one alone can pursue. And time for pursuing anything important for greater social cause never runs out.

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The author-date method of referencing minus the comma should be adopted within the text, e.g. (Karim 1978). The page number(s) should be separated by a colon (Karim 1978:3) and inclusive page numbers by a hyphen (Karim 1989: 3-14). When citing more than one author, entries should be chronological with works of different authors separated by a semi-colon (Khan 1965; Karim 1978).

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Use universal's and British rather than American spellings (colour, not color).

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Contents

Editorial
Guidelines for Contributors

Articles

- Towards a Theory of Muslim Social Stratification 1
Khurshed Alam
- The Social and Cultural Significance of Homestead Forests 13
Khondoker Mokaddem Hossain
- ✓ Urbanization in Bangladesh: A Socio-historical Analysis 35
Omar Faruque
- Grassroots Views on Health Practices, Changes in Health Behaviour and Policy Means for Health Communication in Bangladesh 49
Mohammad Mainul Islam
- The Life Style of MSM: A Study in Two Suburb Areas of Dhaka City in Bangladesh 61
Mozammel Haque Neogi
- ✓ Impact of the Bangabandhu Bridge on Environment: A Study in a Selected Area 77
Selina Ahmed, K. M. Rezaul Karim and Amirul Alam Khan

Book Review

- Dr. Afroza Begum, Government-NGO Interface in Development Management 85
K. M. Rezaul Karim

The Social and Cultural Significance of Homestead Forests

Khondoker Mokaddem Hossain*

The paper briefly explores the social and cultural use and significance of homestead forests in rural Bangladesh. It explores the social anthropological and sociological significance of ritual, beliefs, customs, festivals and ceremonial activities related to tree and trees products from historical and empirical points of view. On the whole, the paper has analyzed the rituals, beliefs, myths, customs and many other aspects of life relating to trees, plants, herbs and their products in the culture of both Bengali Hindus and Muslims. These forest-centered rituals, customs, ceremonies and activities are not just a social nature but have an important element of personal involvement. The forests are not just a ceremonial asset; they are very much a part of society's religious, cultural and communal heritage. It is doubtful whether larger state-controlled or private forests could perform these roles as effectively as the homestead forests.

Introduction

Homestead trees, plants and shrubs have significant social and cultural uses. Some trees, plants and shrubs are considered sacred in the Hindu and Muslim religions. Trees are also an integral part of rural life. There are myths, rituals and beliefs, which involved trees and tree products as symbols. There, plants and shrubs also have a social and religious role in marriages of both Hindus and Muslims. There are many social festivals around the Bengali calendar, and in the celebration of these, the villages use fruit, flowers and other products of the forests. Social, religious and political gatherings are often held under the shade of big trees or clusters of trees, which act as symbols of social and cultural harmony. Trees are also important meeting places of rural women who share the pains and pleasures of their daily lives. For children, the panoply of the trees must be treated as important for fun and recreation. The old folk also use the areas under the trees as a place to gather for leisure and socializing. In the shade of trees much happens that is important in the life of the rural

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folk. Trees provide a joyous and harmonious atmosphere for all segments of the population.

Definition of Homestead Forests

Multi-purpose plants, including fruit and timber trees, and bamboo, which are grown on small plots of private land, usually around people's homes, found all over the country, are referred to as homestead forests. The homestead forests cover the smallest forest land area of 0.23 million hectares or 1.9 per cent of the total land area of Bangladesh.

Importance of Homestead Forests

The privately owned homestead forests are distributed much more evenly through the country. About 10 million households in over 85,650 villages have homestead forests and 80 per cent of them are covered with trees. The total standing volume of trees on homestead lands is estimated to be about 79 million cubic meters, or more than seven times the volume of the growing stock in the Sundarban forests which cover nearly twice the area (USAID, 1990)

These homestead forests supply about 80 per cent of the fuel-wood and 90 per cent building materials of the country. Moreover, the homestead forests supply animal fodder, medicinal ingredients, bamboo, cane, as well as income and employment to the rural people. Sometimes the forests and forest resources help in meeting rural people's emergency and contingency such as the expenses involved in social conventions like weddings, funerals, religious festivals, natural and other disasters and physical incapacity. The trees of the homestead forests also make important contributions to rural households. These include agro-forestry, horticulture, vegetable garden, fisheries and livestock production to better satisfy the full range of household needs as well as to increase the range of income-generating activities.

Methods

This study relies heavily on the information obtained from the field observation conducted in carefully selected villages of Bangladesh. The information sought is naturally based on certain methods and techniques. The information was collected from the village people in the light of their direct experience and involvement. How the needs and problems relate to the existence of forests – and people's access to them – has been

at the centre of our investigation. Throughout the study we have used a combination of interviewing and participant-observation for the collection of information. Certain information relating to social, economic and cultural contexts is better obtained by observing the way certain events occur. This method is referred to as the participant-observation method in which the researchers observed the way the respondents' tasks and rituals are relevant to the study.

Social Anthropological and Sociological Significance of Ritual, Beliefs, Customs, Festivals and Ceremonial Activities Related to Trees and Tree Products: A brief Historical Overview

Sociologists and social anthropologists have long focused on the ceremonial customs, religious and magical beliefs, myths, legends and rituals of different cultures. Among the pioneers of such researchers are Durkheim (1915), Radcliffe-Brown (1922), Frazer (1924), Tylor (1924), Malinowski (1948) and Turner (1969). These thinkers have focused on particular objects of beliefs, rituals, customs and myths, which are socially significant for many reasons. Ceremonial activities can be expressed in a symbolic way and a wide variety of things of a particular society can be identified through different symbols. Certain cooperative activities, therefore, may be interpreted in a symbolic way to express the solidarity or unity of a particular society, as Durkheim pointed out. For Durkheim, rituals and beliefs were the means of reviving and strengthening the basic moral precepts on which social life is founded. These precepts endow people with a compelling authority. He further stated that belief in the sense of ideas about spirits, ghosts, gods and nature is one of the important aspects of social life of a particular community (Durkheim, 1915).

Radcliffe-Brown (1922) noted that the performance of rituals generates certain 'sentiments', which are good for the social harmony and integration of a particular society as a whole. He claimed that, through rituals, human beings always manipulate their thoughts in a social way. Observing the diverse use of the symbols in both religious and secular contexts could discover the meaning of rituals and symbols.

In considering the Andamanese system of rituals and myths, Radcliffe-Brown developed a hypothesis about the relationship between rituals and myths within the larger context of religion. He argued that, for the Andamanese, religion has two important aspects: a belief in nature and an organized relationship of power between man and the 'higher

powers'. This power relationship has a moral character, and is one of the principles that regulates and organizes the islanders' ceremonial life, so that harmony is established and maintained. His analysis, therefore, emphasizes the social value of power, ceremony, natural phenomena, and religion (Radcliffe-Brown, 1922).

Frazer (1924) has stated that the rituals and beliefs were the central focus of primitive societies. Rituals were, for him, actions consequent on certain cosmological beliefs and manifestations of ideas about the nature of the world. His assumption was that certain beliefs and rituals were the key to an understanding of the primitive societies. He examined thoroughly how trees have played a significant role in the religious, cultural and social history among the Aryan race in Europe, the Finnish-Ugrian peoples, the African peoples, the Russian peoples, the Asian Indian peoples, and the French, Danish and Norwegian peoples (Frazer, 1994, revised edition).

Turner (1969) has analyzed the rituals and rites of the Ndembu who belong to great congeries of West and Central African cultures and conjoin, with considerable skill, in wood-carving and related arts, an elaborate development of ritual-based symbolism. He further elaborated on how different kinds of trees are treated as symbols of rituals in Ndembu culture. The *mudyi* (*Diplorrhyncus condylocarpon*) tree, for example, is the symbol of a girl's puberty rituals meaning simultaneously breast milk and matriliney; while the *mukula* (*Pterocarpus angolensis*) tree stands for the blood of circumcision and the moral community of mature tribesmen.

Beliefs, rituals, festivals and ceremonies are, therefore, among the most attractive features of a particular culture. All the special performances or complex of performances at special times provide vital insights into the religious, aesthetic, social, economic and political values and concerns in the societies in which they occur. It is not always the case that the most attractive aspects of a subject under investigation are the most consequential; but in these cases it would seem that the intrinsic appeal of the material is matched by its significance (Guy and Glenn, 1982)

Social anthropologists and sociologists can look at the myths, beliefs, customs, festivals and ceremonies as ways of learning about the social system of a particular society or community, since certain components of

social life become clearer at the time of ceremonial performances. Specific performances of the community are treated here as the focus of social action, the source of social, cultural and religious structures and therefore an important institution of Bangladeshi society.

The Social and Cultural Significance of Rituals, Beliefs, Myths, Customs, Festivals and Legends of Bangladesh Rural Society: An Overview

The rituals, beliefs, myths, customs, festivals and legends of Bangladesh rural society combine the characteristics of Hindu, Muslim and secular Bengali cultures. Bangladeshi society has retained the traditions of 'prehistoric and contemporary cultures', as they were an integral part or even more of ancient rituals and beliefs. As Bengal (Both East and West) has been ruled by Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim rulers, Bengali history shows the assimilation and integration of the traditions, values and rituals of all these different cultures. However, the East Bengalis (now Bangladeshis) also share with the west Bengalis an independent cultural identity in the form of a common language, traditions and value systems which make up the 'Bengali culture'. This culture has influenced and been strongly influenced by Hinduism. Even at the turn of the nineteenth century, during the period of 'Bengali Renaissance', the Bengali language and culture were linked to the Brahmanic heritage of Hinduism. The Bengali language was heavily influenced by the Sanskrit language and by Hindu mythologies and symbols. Although an attempt was made to purify the Bengali language and culture from 'Hindu accretions' by some hard core Muslim leaders, such an effort was clearly caught between the two opposite poles of an extra-territorial Pan-Islamic ideology and of a local geographical Bengali culture (Rozario, 1992). Bengali history, therefore, shows the signs of an identity quest as the Bengali culture has fluctuated between Hindu, Muslim and secular influences within the region, loosely called Bengal.

However, the present study is particularly focused on the religious, social and cultural aspects of trees, rather than the other elements of our culture. In practice, trees feature in all aspects of our culture: language, religion, politics, art, medicine, and even the wider social structure itself. Trees and tree products provide the venue for religious, social and cultural practices. Tree products such as fruit, flowers and juices are used in

many ceremonies. Some trees are treated as the abode of ancestors. Sometimes trees are viewed in a negative way too, i.e. as a source of evil. Ritual and ceremonies, which draw on tree symbols often, serve to link us with aspects of our cultural heritage. Trees also feature in many myths and tales. For example, in Hindu legends, the tree stands between heaven and earth, and is associated with creation as well as with 'three' conceptual planes (heaven, earth and the 'under world') of existence. The tree is a maternal symbol: a protector and provider who gives fruit, other foods and medicines, provider of a reservoir of water and a protector against the bad and evil spirits. The tree often symbolises human fecundity in both Hindu and Muslim cultures. Finally, trees play a role in all facets and phases of our lives.

As rituals, customs, ceremonies, myths and beliefs related to trees have many elements, they vary within our cultures. For example, there are many uses of natural and supernatural elements involving trees among Hindus and Muslims, which differ from one another, although they are both an integral part of composite Bengali culture. Despite many similarities in the way these elements are used, there are some variations too. This is because different segments of the same religious groups may have different social, cultural and religious identities which give rise to the variations in their practices. For example, the Brahmin and non-Brahmin Hindus may follow different rituals and customs in some cases. There are differences in the practices of the upper and lower economic classes. On the other hand, there are many customs and ceremonies related to trees which are common to both the Hindus and the Muslims, a blend which reflects the culture of the rural folk in general. However, in this study, we do not differentiate these practices on the basis of religion, caste, class or region. The purpose here is to examine the common aspects of these traditions as they apply to the rural people.

The Symbolic and Sacred Significance of Trees

Various forms of religious worship are practiced to fulfil the spiritual aspirations of Hindu families and communities. These include the worship of trees, of deities such as *Siva*, *Parvati* and others, and natural objects like the Sun, the Moon and various planets. We will examine below the importance of trees as an object of workshop for family welfare. This examination is based both on observations of village life and on the findings of the field survey.

It was reported by almost all Hindu respondents and priests of the survey villages that many kinds of trees, shrubs, leaves, grass, plants and fruit are objects of worship. Among these are *tulsi*, *peepal*, *neem*, *bel* and mango leaves, the banyan tree and common and important fruit like coconut, banana and nut. *Tulsi* is the basil plant and is personified in the Puranas as a wife of Vishnu and is therefore sacred. Its leaves are used as offerings in the worship of Vishnu and other goddesses. The *tulsi* plant is an object of daily worship by Hindu women of all castes and it is grown in all Hindu houses for ceremonial use.

Worship of the banyan tree by Hindu women also occurs in the survey villages. The object of this worship is to seek the welfare of husbands and children. In general, women worship this tree either in the weaning phase of the lunar cycle or in conjunction with certain rituals involving fasting. The worship is said to be in honour of *Savitri*, a Purana-character, who won back her husband's life from the hands of *Yama*, the god of death. The legend is that *Savitri*'s husband *Satyavan* took ill and died under a banyan tree. She left his body under that tree to follow his spirit to the land of death. The tree protected the body until life was restored and is, therefore, regarded as sacred. It was reported by the villagers that there were a number of banyan trees in their villages 30-40 years ago. Many of the trees are no longer there because of increased population pressure and changing land and tree tenure systems. Only one or two banyan trees were noticed in survey villages and some villagers reported that the worship of the banyan tree was becoming difficult because of its rapid disappearance.

Another sacred tree is the *Peepal*. The *Peepal* is a species of fig tree, allied to the banyan tree and often identified with it. Although this tree was found everywhere in rural areas during the Pakistani period (1947-1971), very few trees exist at present. The sacredness of this tree is variously accounted for. One of these is that its root provides a milky-white sap which is in the nature of caoutchouc, and which has associations with fertility and sex. This endows the tree with special character revered particularly by women of child-bearing age. Some women who are unable to have children or whose children fail to survive take to worshipping the cobra snakes. This is done by installing stones carved with the images of the cobras at the foot of the *peepal* tree. It is

also a very common custom among such women to pour milk over any ant-hills around a peepal tree in the belief that the milk will reach the serpents living beneath them. This aspect of the cobra worship is clearly related to *peepal* worship, and is regarded as a fertility rite. Vogel (1926:19) observes, "there exists a wide spread belief that the cobra has power to impart fecundity and remove barrenness" and "it is the sacred peepal tree where the cobra diets are embedded" (Vogel, cited by Srinivas, 1952:14).

The *aswatta* is another tree, which grows to a huge size and is a symbol of worship. It is one of the more beautiful trees but has also become rarer. Only one or two trees were found to exist in the survey villages or nearby localities. Hindus believe that the god Vishnu was born under this tree and they therefore treat it with great respect. No one is allowed to cut it down, lop off its branches, or even pull off its leaves unless they are to be used in acts of worship. To feel this tree would be an awful sacrilege, and quite unpardonable. According to Hindu mythology, this tree is consecrated to Vishnu; or rather it is Vishnu himself in the form of a tree.

Although Hindu religious practices encourage Hindu people to feel their sacred sensibilities toward trees, Muslim people also have their view of such sacredness. According to Muslim religious mysticism, trees such as the banyan, *peepal* and *aswatta* often seem to be links to the Almighty. When a Muslim male passes beneath these trees, he utters *bismillah* (in the name of Almighty) and the Muslim female covers her head. Even sleeping under a tree is often dangerous because of the possible visitation of spirits. But there is a difference in the Hindu and Muslim mystical beliefs relating to trees. According to Hindu Mysticism, certain trees are the abode of gods whereas in Muslim mysticism, these trees are the links to the Almighty. But in both religions, these trees are symbols of divinity because they acquire some special power (*sakti*) from both god and the Almighty and those saintly persons who live beneath these trees possess some special power from them. Therefore, the trees are treated as a connection to these special powers, which are passed to the devotees of such saintly persons. As with the Hindu religious mysticism, Muslims also consider some trees as sacred symbols of power and they try to protect these trees from any kind of destruction.

Despite these similarities, there are some differences too. According to Muslim religious mysticism, some trees such as tamarind, *hijal*, *mandar* and banyan are often treated as the abode of good and evil spirits such as *jin*, *pori* and or ghosts. These spirits may be found resting, sitting or travelling around these particular trees at a particular time of day and night. Although these trees are sometimes feared due to their evil spirits, Muslim mystics do not encourage people to destroy these trees because there are also some good spirits who may sit and travel around these trees at other times. Muslim people try to maintain some sort of distance from these trees at the particular times of day and night when the evil spirits may travel or sit around them.

There are some other fundamental differences as well. The Muslim religion is monotheistic whereas the Hindu religion is based on polytheistic beliefs (Zaehner, 1969). The Hindu religion unites the essence of all life such as human, animal and plant. Moreover, the Hindu religion is a 'Sanaton Dharma' which incorporates 'the eternal essence' of life in the universe. The universe is surrounded with all natural ingredients: the moon, the stars, the rising sun, the winds, the sky, the vegetation, the animals, birds, rivers, trees and mountains. These together form the natural creation in its entirety (Prime, 1992). Trees are one of the important ingredients of human life in Hindu religious mythology, which is one of the important dissimilarities with the Muslim religion. But Muslims also observed many rites, rituals, customs, beliefs and ceremonies related to trees as do the Hindus. Moreover, Bengali Muslims are influenced by Bengali Hindu rites, rituals, beliefs and customs because both of them have integrated the tradition of 'Bengali culture'. Therefore, it would be justified to say that despite differences in religious mythology of both Muslim and Hindu beliefs about trees they regard them as sacred and both sides treat them with great care.

In the Hindu tradition, there are seven different species of trees, which the Brahmins consider sacred, and as symbols of worship. Among these, *aswatta*, *peepal*, *vepu* and banyan are the most important. There are some particular manners and rituals in which these trees are worshipped. Sometimes these trees are invested, like the Brahmins, with the triple cord, the very same ceremonies being performed. And sometimes they are solemnly married. Marriage among trees is a legend in Hindu

mythology and is practiced in many Indian villages as noted by Dubois (1953) who reported that in his survey village there were *aswatta* and *vepu* trees side by side. The inhabitants of the village informed him they had seen the two trees being planted together some fifty years ago. The villagers had also been present at the wedding ceremony of the trees, which lasted several days and were celebrated at the expense of a wealthy person of the neighborhood at a cost of more than 1,500 rupees. There is one interesting example of a marriage between a tree and a woman in India. This marriage was a symbol of welfare. As the parents of the women were unable to arrange a marriage for their daughter owing to their financial inability they took her to a priest. The priest arranged her marriage with a local tree. The significance of this marriage was that the tree as the symbol of welfare would look after and protect the woman from insecurity (The Sangbad, 1992). There is a Hindi film entitled *d'Satti* in which the marriage between a woman and a tree has been shown, and its social and religious significance highlighted in a critical fashion.

The religious importance of tree worship is a kind of 'good work', which Hindus perform in order to obtain the pardon for their sins in this world and to ensure their happiness in the next world (Dubois, 1953). In fact, particular trees are the abode of particular gods who take up their residence for specific purposes. Therefore, in popular belief trees are identified as symbols of gods. The religious text the Gita says: "With roots above and branches below, the imperishable fig-tree has been declared. Its leaves are the Vedic hymns. He who so knows it, knows the Veda. Below and above extend its branches nourished by the qualities (gunas) and the objects of sense are the sprouts. Below are extended the roots from which arise actions in the world of men".

Although Muslims do not worship trees, the trees like banyan, *aswatta* and *peepal* are treated as sacred by them too. The reason is that many Muslim *peer*, *fakir*, *sadhu* and *dorbesh* who are treated as saints have their *astana* under these trees. These saints are treated as the symbol of spiritual and religious power. As they live under the shade of the big trees, it is the belief of common people that there might be some connection between the Almighty, the saints and the trees. In other words, the trees are treated as the symbolic connection between the saints and the Almighty.

Apart from their mythological importance, trees like the banyan, the *vepu*, the *aswatta*, and the *peepal* also have ecological, social and cultural significance. For example, the thick foliage of these trees makes not only a splendid shade - a priceless boon in the hot climate of India and Bangladesh - it also has aesthetic and artistic beauty which attracted many travelers, philosophers, and even invaders. As Dubois (1953:652) noted about the banyan tree, "their large leaves, very soft to the touch, in colour bright green, are so light and thin that the slightest breeze sets them in motion; and as they produce an impression of most refreshing coolness, the trees are considered to possess health-giving properties. When stirred by a breeze the leaves make a pleasant rustle, which some Hindu authors have sometimes likened to the melodious sound of the *vina*". The Greek philosopher Theophrastus (370-c. 288 BC) duly described the external beauties of the banyan tree as follows: "The Indian land has its so-called 'fig-tree' which drops its roots from branches every year...and it drops them, not from the new branches, but from those of last year or even from older ones; these take hold of the earth and make, as it were, a fence about the tree so that it becomes like a tent in which men sometimes live. The roots as they grow are easily distinguished from branches, being whiter, hairy, crooked, and leafless. The foliage above is also abundant, and the whole tree is round and exceedingly large. The leaf is quite as large as a shield, but the fruit is very small, only as large as a chick-pea, and it resembles a gig". This is why the Greeks named this tree a 'fig-tree' (Theophrastus, 1916 cited by Desmond, (1992:3). Desmond further (1992:3) noted, "Hindus planted this sacred tree along the verges of roads and in villages, providing shelter for the people and a community of small mammals, birds, and insects". He further added that the tree was one of the attractions to travelers. The hanging columns of its aerial roots are reminiscent of the tenuous lines of Gothic tracery presenting a dynamic composition for European artists like William Hodges and the Daniells. Bishop Heber experienced an aura of sanctum within its canopy: 'what a noble place of worship', as he confirmed in his journal (Herber, quoted by Desmond, 1992:3).

The Importance of Forest and Forest Products as a Location for Social, Cultural and Religious Activities

Trees, plants, herbs, flowers, fruit and leaves often have a sacred role in many religious festivals and rituals in both Hindu and Muslim communities. For Hindus, the worship of Durga (a manifestation of Sakti or divine energy), Lakshmi (the goddess of prosperity), Saraswati (the goddess of learning), Ganesh and Kartik (the two sons of Siva) as well as the festivals such as the *Holi*, the *Diwali* and the *Dassehra* involve the trees and tree products. All such festivals also involve the preparation and distribution of food, including fruit, which are consecrated by being first offered in worship. Some forms of worship have a mythological connection to certain fruit and leaves. For example, when Durga worship begins, a *kalash* (an earthen vessel) filled with water is placed in front of the goddess. The *kalash* has a coconut and some mango leaves placed over its mouth. The *kalash* along with the coconut and the mango leaves represents the life force of the deity who is believed to sit in penance to acquire weapons and the skill to use them in fighting demons. The goddess Saraswati is worshipped as the goddess of learning and music. As a symbolic gesture, students put the consecrated leaves and flowers of certain kinds inside their books for good luck and success.

Hindu Maha-sankranti and Fruit Rituals

A festival, which takes place during winter, is called *maha-sankranti*. This occurs on the day of the vernal equinox, which marks the beginning of the spring season in the Northern hemisphere. The festival lasts three days. On the third day a ritual of cow worship is practiced. This involves preparing a liquid concoction made up of water, saffron powder, some seeds and leaves of certain trees and plants. The cows and oxen are sprinkled with the liquid as a mark of worship and offering. Their horns are painted in various colours and around their necks are hung items of food, coconuts and other fruit. As these are shaken off by the animals, they are eagerly scrambled for and devoured as consecrated items by people. This kind of festival however is fast disappearing from the rural areas with the rapid depletion of the cattle population and scarcity of fruit trees.

Sacrifice of Animals and Related Ritual

The sacrifice of animals is practised as part of a number of religious festivals of the Muslim community. During the festival of *Idul-Azha*, for example, animals, especially before they are slaughtered, the animals are given leaves especially jackfruit, acacia and banana leaves, atop rice, chaana dal and water to eat. The significance is that as the animal is being scarified for the Almighty, it should not suffer from hunger and pain.

Fasting and Fruit Ritual

Another use of fruit related to the rituals of fasting is observed by the Hindu community. A common practice for many Hindus is to fast on the Seventh day of every lunar fortnight the *ekadashi*. The person fasting is allowed to eat certain fruit like bananas, papaws and coconuts. Milk is also taken but as a drink. The purpose of such fasting is religious, signifying self purification. The consumption of cooked food falls significantly at this time while that of fruit increases.

A complete day to dusk fasting is also observed by the Muslim community during the whole lunar month of Ramadan. The fast is broken after sun-set and varieties of fruit such as papaws, bananas and green coconut juice are consumed at this time. Although eating fruit is not a required ritual, it is an established tradition and is widely practised throughout the fasting month.

Herb Ritual and the Birth of a Baby

The birth of a new baby in a Hindu family is observed with certain rituals, which involve the use of herbs and plants of certain kinds. A new birth means a *vridhi sutak* (Pollution of 'increase' or 'multiplication'), and accordingly, the 'outsiders' (those standing outside one's patrilineal descent group) are forbidden to eat at the home of the new born for twelve days. At the end of this period a ritual of sun worship is observed as a mark of purification of the new born and the mother. Friends and relatives are invited to share a meal, which typically consists of consecrated fruit, herbs and other natural ingredients.

New Born and Wood Fire Ritual

The custom of lighting a fire after a new birth in a family is found common among both Hindus and Muslims. A wood fire is lit partly for the comfort of mother who is believed to need the warmth after giving birth. It also helps the uterus to retract and the mother to get back her normal shape, so it is believed.

Death and Plant Rituals

Trees, in the Muslim belief, provide protection for the dead body as a symbol of prayer to the Almighty. Trees and plants are planted on graves with this object. In most cases the *pata-bahar* (colour leaf), rose plants, *meandi* trees, karai and date palms are used for this purpose. There is a belief that if the grave is shaded by a tree or a plant, the deceased will not be punished after death. So, a tree or plant is planted on the grave by close relatives whenever they visit the graveyard.

Although Hindus usually cremate their dead, saintly persons or those who are otherwise revered may be given a burial in their own yard or in a compound of a *math* (temple) where they lived. These spots are marked by a plant or a tree usually a *bel* tree. The trees are then worshipped in the belief that the dead will protect the interests of the living. They also plant large trees that will provide shade, usually at a river-side place.

There are some mythological explanations as to why trees are planted in graveyards. Muslim religious leaders such as the *Imams* (who lead the weekly prayers) and the *Mollahs* (who perform priestly activities) explain that the souls of the departed persons become parrots and other birds for which the trees become nesting places. So it is an important task to plant a tree around the grave and to pour water at its root, to help it grow. Hindu priests, on the other hand, explain that on the *Amavasya* (New moon) night, the spirits of the dead swing on the tendrils of the banyan tree. A *Sraddha* for the dead is also performed under the banyan tree a few days after the death. An annual *Sraddha*, which many Hindus perform, is also performed under a banyan tree. The non-Brahmin Hindus believe that if a *bel* or a *peepal* grows spontaneously around a cremator site then it is an incarnation of the dead person.

Death and Leaf Ritual

A special leaf ritual involving food served on a leaf-plate to the departed soul is observed by the Hindu community on the tenth day after the death of a family member. Death immediately brings a complete and total stoppage of eating and cooking activities in the affected family. However, on the tenth day, rice is cooked by washing it only once before the cooking. A griddle plate is used for serving the *kacha* (non-fry) bread. Besides, whole *urddal* (one kind of lentil), a vegetable, and the *bara* (one kind of snacks/chops) are also prepared for a meal, which symbolises austerity. The first serving of these items is made on a leaf-plate, which is hidden around the cooking area so that no one can see or touch it. All family members are served food by a single woman who must stay in the cooking area from the beginning to the end of the cooking and eating activities. At the end of the meal, the principal cremator, usually the eldest son of the dead person carries the hidden plate of food to an isolated area outside the home and leaves it for the departed soul.

Muslims also arrange a special feast in the memory of the departed soul, and invite to it relatives, friends and any local destitute person. On the 40th day after the death, a feast is arranged by the family of the deceased. Rice is cooked and cattle are killed for meat for the guests. Leaf plates (banana leaf) are used for serving the food. Usually, people sit under the shade of a big tree to share the meal with the family members. At the beginning of the meal, the *imam* prays for the departed soul. However, unlike the Hindus, eating on a leaf plate and sitting under the shade of tree is not obligatory, it is rather a custom or tradition.

Diseases, Illnesses and Rituals

Particular diseases have, according to Hindu belief, their governing deities. When some one is sick, a relative takes an earthen pot half-filled with water, covers it with an earthen lid and places it on a bed of rice on the ground. Blades of *durba* grass are then put on the lid and on it is placed an image of the deity associated with the particular illness. The water from the pot is sprinkled (on the sick person) with the help of the grass.

For the cure of a fever or an illness of a family member, Muslim women often make a *manot*. At bed time, she packs some rice (at least one kilogram) and cash (five to ten *taka*) in a new *gamsha* (a cotton towel) kept at the bed side of the ill person. Before sunrise, she would take away the packet and tie it to a tree in the courtyard. The beggar who first visits her home in the morning would be informed by one of the elder female members that there was a *manot* packet hanging from the tree. The beggar would then take away the packet often praying to the Almighty for the immediate recovery of the ill person. The symbolic significance is that the illness is transferred to the tree through the *manot* packet and the beggar is the person responsible for carrying away the illness from the tree.

Rain and Tree Rituals

If the monsoon rains fail in the months of *Jaisthya*, *Ashar* and *Sravan* (Bengali months, equivalent to May, June and July), it creates a drought. Muslim males are gathered under a big tree (banyan tree) at midday and start praying to the Almighty for immediate relief from the drought. The tree is treated as the symbol of shade, and there is a belief that if the people pray in the shade, the Almighty might have mercy on them and their wishes would be granted. Hindus also worship in similar circumstances, but in a different way. They worship the *peepal* and banyan trees and pour water on their leaves and trunks as a symbolic gesture of bathing the trees. The legend is that the water used for bathing must be allowed time to reach the sea. The day it reaches the sea heavy rain will fall; water is also therefore poured into a river or *nullah*.

Fertility and Fruit Rituals

Fruit like coconuts are offered to the gods by infertile Hindu women in the hope that fertility may be granted in return. A portion of fruit offered to a God through a priest is given to the woman as *prasad*. A bridal pair is also given coconuts by one of the priests at their marriage. Eating fruit, riding a fruit-tree at night and then eating its fruit, rolling under a fruit tree and then eating its fruit and stepping on a fruit are some of the rituals practised in the hope of obtaining its fertility.

In contrast, there is a taboo amongst Muslim women who are fertile that eating fruit at particular times may inhibit their fertility. Muslim women, particularly the unmarried ones are advised by elder women not to take any fruit especially coconut and banana immediately after a shower or a bath. The reason is that as these trees are believed to be treated as the dwelling of 'evil' that may inhibit fertility.

Women, Trees and Taboo

There are restrictions on pregnant Muslim women not to walk under certain trees. They are advised by the elder women not to walk under trees like the betel, *hijal*, *mander* and banyan. Walking through a bamboo bush is also believed to be harmful for them. There are some particular times of the day, such as the evening, mid-might and the early morning when the bad *jin* (one kind of imagined human, which is invisible), *pori*, ghosts and other evil spirits may be found resting, sitting or travelling around these particular trees and the bamboo bush. Their 'evil-eyes' may have an evil influence on pregnant women and their unborn children may be born crippled, physically and/or intellectually.

In contrast, most trees are treated as sacred in Hindu myths, and the power of a tree is sensitive to impure contacts. For example, a menstruating woman may only use plantain leaves as plates, but not the leaves of their trees. If an infertile woman bathes in the shade of a tree she dies or may continue to be infertile, it is believed. If a girl attaining puberty touches a tree, the tree withers, it is believed. However, these are all legends or superstitions and very few people observe these kinds of restrictions any more.

Betrothal, Marriages and Tree Ritual

Amongst the Hindus, betrothal is a social contract and is, as a ritual, an indispensable preliminary to the marriage of a girl. There is a fruit ritual as a part of the religious rites involved in the Hindu betrothal. Amongst a number of rituals, the fruit ritual is one kind of religious rite where the marriage initiative is almost invariably taken by the girl's parents and some fruit along with money and clothes are sent to the prospective groom's house. The girl's father sends some fruit such as coconuts and

ripe bananas, one or more *taka* and some clothes as a conventional gift to the boy. These are made over to him by a priest and a barber at his parent's house and in return he also sends the girl a conventional gift.

There are a number of rites in a Hindu marriage, and many rites involve flowers, fruit, leaves, herbs and trees as important aspects of the marriage festival. One such important involvement of trees and leaves is related to the construction of a *bedi* (altar) where the marriage is performed by a priest. All marriages take place under canopies made of leaves and branches of trees, which are created in the courtyard or in front of the principal entrance door to the house. The Penndel is usually supported by twelve wooden posts or pillars, and covered with foliage and branches of trees where the priest ignites the sacred fire and pours into it with due *mantras* a libation of clarified butter. Then the father of the bride welcomes the bridegroom in the prescribed form by offering water to wash his feet and by the well-known obligation called *arghya* (offerings). He then gives his daughter's hand to the boy thrice, reciting the holy *mantor*. The bride and the groom then walk around the nuptial fire, the wife holding the husband's garments, to call to witness that effulgent light which pervades every quarter of the globe, and to vow that neither in thought, deed or word will either swerve from the path of duty.

Muslims, in contrast, have some customary uses of flowers, leaves, fruit and trees, which have a social significance. For example, the uses of trees and leaves are noticed on the occasion of decoration of the houses of the bride and the bridegroom. The marriage ceremony is performed in the bride's house, in an open space. A Penndel is made and a canopy is hung over it. Gates are constructed by planting banana plants, and wreaths of flowers and festoons of leaves adorn the gates and platforms as well as the route between the two. This kind of tradition has a social significance because many joyous and humorous customs and related traditions are associated with it. Women, young children and even the older folk amongst the villagers, the neighbours and relatives all assemble in joyful celebration and contribute verbal wit and humour.

Table 1.1 summaries the role of tree-plant-herb-and shrub-based rites, rituals, customs, traditions and other activities, which are practised by Bangladeshi Hindus and Muslims.

Table 1.1. Trees and Their Social, Cultural and Religious Uses by Bangladeshi Rural Hindus and Muslims: A Summary

Names of trees, plants, herbs, shrubs and other similar objects	Tree-plant-herb-based rites, rituals, customs, and other activities	Symbolic and other significance
1. <i>Aswatta, peepal, vepu and banyan trees</i>	a) A symbol of welfare of husbands and children	
-do-	b) Hope of pregnancy	
-do-	c) Considered sacred as the abode of Vishnu and other gods	
-do-	d) Symbol of welfare and security.	
-do-	e) Shelter for the village folk, mammals, birds and insects	
-do-	f) Acts as a go-between the Almighty and the saintly men	
2. Coconut banana trees, fruit, leaves, seeds and saffron powder	Ritual for worldly and spiritual welfare during the day of vernal equinox	
3. Leaves of jackfruit trees, acacia and banana; rice, lentils and water	Prevent the animals suffering from any hunger and pain prior to and during slaughter	
4. Ripe bananas, papaws and other fruit	For Hindus, a symbol of self purification; for Muslims, a matter of traditional practice	
5. Banana leaf	For Hindus, serving food on leaf is a symbol of austerity whereas for Muslims it is a customary tradition	
6. <i>Dalim</i> trees	Illnesses are carried away by trees	
7. Wood fire	Comforts for new born baby; heat to retract the mother's uterus	
8. <i>Pata bahar</i> & rose plants; <i>mendi, karai</i> and date palm trees	Plants and trees are treated as the symbolic nests for the departed souls	
9. <i>Bel</i> and banyan trees	A symbol of incarnation of the deceased Trees are treated as the carrier of sprits of the deceased	

Names of trees, plants, herbs, shrubs and other similar objects	Tree-plant-herb-based rites, rituals, customs, and other activities	Symbolic and other significance
10. Banyan and <i>peepal</i>	Ritual of Hindus for rainfall, and of Muslims for use as a 'connector' to god	For Muslims, trees are treated as the connector between the Almighty and human beings. For Hindus, bathing of the trees may cause rainfall.
11. Coconut and banana fruit	Fertility and fruit rituals among Hindu and Muslim women	Eating fruit at certain times of the day is a taboo among Muslim women in fear that the trees are the dwelling of evil which may cause the women to become infertile. In contrast, Hindu women eat fruit in the belief that fertility will be granted.
12. <i>Hijal</i> , <i>mandar</i> , banyan trees and bamboo bushes	Taboo among Muslims, particularly women	Walking under trees during certain times is restricted for fear that these trees are the carrier of <i>jins</i> , <i>poris</i> and ghosts which might abort pregnancy.
13. <i>Debdaru</i> leaves, <i>tulsi</i> leaves, flowers, coconut, banana, <i>durba</i> grass and fire	Marriage rituals and traditions among Hindus and Muslims	Hindu marriages involve the rites of trees, fruit, flowers, leaves and fire with a view to securing the bond between the bride and the groom. On the other hand, Muslims use trees and leaves for customary decoration
14. <i>Durba</i> grasses	Illness and <i>durba</i> ritual among Hindus	Pleasing the governing deities

Source: Field Survey, 1992 & 2000

Conclusion

The findings indicate that the rituals, beliefs, myths, customs, and many other aspects of village life involve trees, plants, herbs and their products in the culture of both Hindu and Muslim Bengali people. These forest centered rituals, customs, ceremonies and activities are not just a social nature but have an important element of personal involvement. They, therefore, help to maintain and enrich the individuals, the groups, as well

as the society's culture and heritage. Many of these activities also help to bring the two diverse religious groups - the Hindus and the Muslims-together. Each community participates in the festivals of the others on common ground; as it was, under trees or in wooded areas, which they regard as their common heritage. The symbolic significance of the homestead forest is thus enormous. The forests, therefore, are not just a ceremonial asset, they are very much part of society's religious, cultural and common heritage. It is doubtful whether larger state-controlled or private forests could perform these roles as effectively as the homestead forests. But due to the increased economic and social needs of the people, many of the species have disappeared from the homestead forests. Therefore, there has been a significant reduction in homestead forests, which is putting an enormous pressure on the social and cultural demand of village people.

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