

Cultural Ecology of the Indian Sundarban (West Bengal): a research paper for community-led cultural revival

Abstract

The Indian Sundarban (West Bengal) is a distinctive socio-ecological zone of the Bengal delta where land, tide, forest, and settlement have co-evolved over centuries. This paper examines how long histories of habitation, reclamation, and livelihood risk (tigers, tides, cyclones, salinity) generated a locally specific cultural world—expressed through syncretic sacred geographies (Bonbibi–Dakshin Rai–Gazi traditions), oral epics and manuscripts (Bonbibi Johuranama; Raymangal), folk performance genres (palagaan, Manasa pala/jatra, boat songs), and everyday material culture tied to waterways and mangroves. Drawing on published scholarship, ethnographic accounts, and heritage documentation, the paper frames Sundarban culture as *traditional ecological knowledge in performance*—a living archive of environmental ethics, labour history, and disaster memory. Finally, it proposes a practical NGO-led cultural revival strategy: community documentation, intergenerational transmission, ethical cultural tourism, craft and performance livelihoods, and “culture-as-adaptation” programming aligned with disaster risk reduction and conservation governance.

Keywords: Sundarban, Bengal delta, cultural ecology, oral history, Bonbibi, Raymangal, palagaan, Manasa, syncretism, intangible cultural heritage, climate adaptation, NGO cultural revival

1. Introduction: why Sundarban culture is “ecological culture”

The Sundarban is not merely a forest; it is an *amphibious civilization* shaped by tidal time, mangrove ecology, and an unusually intense relationship between livelihood and danger. Here, culture is not a decorative “addition” to development—it is the social technology that enables people to live with uncertainty: river erosion, saline floods, cyclones, and encounters with wildlife.

Two processes are central:

1. Environmental constraint becomes cultural form.

Myths, rituals, and performance traditions encode rules for entering risky spaces and sharing resources—particularly the forest and estuary. Scholarship on Bonbibi describes her worship as a “religion of the forest,” sustained through oral narratives and the text *Bonbibi Johuranama*, and practiced across Hindu–Muslim boundaries in a place-based environmental ethic.

2. Political economy transforms cultural landscapes.

Large-scale reclamation and forest governance remade settlement patterns and access to resources. Historical accounts note reclamation and revenue policies, and the declaration of protected forest status in the late 19th century, reshaping how people could use forest resources.

This paper argues that the Sundarban’s distinct culture is best understood as **cultural ecology**: a combined system of sacred narratives, performance traditions, occupational identities, and adaptive knowledge that emerged from life at the edge of forest and sea.

2. Methods and approach

This is a **synthesis research paper** intended to guide an NGO cultural wing’s revival program. It uses:

- **Literature review:** heritage documentation and scholarship on Bonbibi and palagaan; deltaic settlement history; traditional knowledge frameworks.
- **Cultural-form mapping:** categorization of written traditions (manuscripts, narrative poems) and oral/performative forms (palagaan, jatra/pala, boat songs).
- **Program design lens:** translating findings into a revival blueprint consistent with ethical conservation and livelihood realities.

Limitations: This is not a primary field ethnography; it is an evidence-backed framework that should be validated through block-wise community consultations and performer/collector networks.

3. Historical background: settlement, reclamation, and the making of a delta culture

3.1 Reclamation, governance, and livelihood frontiers

The inhabited Sundarban is a landscape of embankments, canals, and reclaimed tracts alongside protected mangrove forest. Historical accounts describe the long reclamation process and its connection to revenue policy and land leasing, as well as the later restriction of resource use with protected forest declarations.

Cultural implication:

Cultural life in Sundarban grew around **threshold spaces**—forest edge, creek edge, embankment edge—where access is negotiated and danger is constant. This is exactly where protective deities, ritual offerings, and “permission narratives” arise.

3.2 “Risk” as a civilizational driver

Modern scholarship on community–mangrove relations highlights how traditions and environmental challenges co-produce adaptations, using oral narratives and participatory approaches to examine how people perceive and engage with mangroves socio-politically.

Key point: Cultural revival cannot be separated from the lived risk environment; it must work with fishers, honey collectors, forest workers, and women’s shrine communities—where cultural knowledge is still actively used.

4. Written and oral histories: the Sundarban narrative archive

Sundarban cultural life is sustained by a braided archive:

4.1 Written traditions (manuscripts, narrative poems, peripheral texts)

(a) *Bonbibi Johuranama* and the “religion of the forest”

Research explicitly links the Johuranama text with oral history and field narratives, showing how Bonbibi worship blurs religious boundaries and frames environmental belonging.

Sahapedia’s documentation of **Bonbibi-r Palagaan** notes that it survives orally and through handwritten manuscripts, often peripheral to the mainstream literary canon—yet central to delta life.

(b) *Raymangal* (Raymangal) and Dakshin Rai

Banglapedia describes **Raymangal** as a 17th-century Bangla narrative poem about **Daksin Ray**, the tiger-associated folk deity worshipped especially in the Sundarbans for protection.

This is crucial: it shows that Sundarban’s ecological fear (tiger/forest risk) was not merely “superstition” but a narrative system that organized entry into dangerous landscapes.

4.2 Oral histories and folk performance as environmental memory

(a) Bonbibi Palagaan: theatre of coexistence

Sahapedia describes Bonbibi-r Palagaan as a dramatic performance tradition tied to Bonbibi worship, historically recited/sung to invoke protection; it remains specific to the Sundarbans lower delta region. A separate academic paper frames Bonbibi Pala as a myth-based folk drama narrating human–wildlife conflict and anxiety in the Sundarbans.

Interpretation for revival:

Bonbibi Palagaan is a *cultural technology of coexistence*—a ritualized narrative that helps communities conceptualize boundaries, humility, and “rules of the forest.”

(b) Manasa Pala/Jatra: ritual performance as hazard prevention

A detailed reportage on the Indian Sundarban describes worship of the snake goddess **Manasa** and performance of **pala gaan** as an invocation for protection from venomous snakes—directly linking ecology (snakes in island life) with ritual performance and community gathering.

5. The Sundarban cultural ecosystem: key forms and their ecological roots

Below is a practical typology for an NGO cultural wing, organized by **form + ecological function**.

5.1 Sacred geographies and syncretic devotion

Bonbibi worship is frequently described as crossing Hindu–Muslim boundaries in Sundarban contexts (shared rituals and narratives).

This syncretic ecology matters because it has historically supported **social cooperation in risky livelihoods** (shared boats, shared creeks, shared embankments).

Revival opportunity: community shrine songs, annual palagaan circuits, women-led ritual stewardship (documenting “sebika” practices is emerging in journalism as well).

5.2 Performance traditions (palagaan, jatra, pala)

- **Bonbibi palagaan** (forest entry, tiger risk, ethical extraction narratives).
- **Manasa pala/jatra** (snake hazard, household protection, social cohesion).

Threats: performance-to-entertainment drift without community meaning; loss of younger performers; commercialization pressures (noted in some discussions of tourism shaping performance contexts).

5.3 River and boat cultures: songs as hydrological intimacy

Bhatiyali is widely documented as a boatman’s song form rooted in riverine Bengal; the term links to **ebb/downstream** and the lived experience of water travel.

In Sundarban, this water-life is intensified: tide reversals, creek labyrinths, and navigation as daily labour—making boat songs and river lore central.

Revival opportunity: “river voice” archives (audio), school-based river-song clubs, community radio.

5.4 Traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) and cultural practice

A UNESCO-linked research document on traditional knowledge, culture, and biodiversity emphasizes the need for extensive documentation of TEK and cultural practices using oral history and ethnography, and recommends incorporating human dimensions of wildlife into conservation governance.

This aligns perfectly with NGO cultural revival: cultural work is also conservation diplomacy.

6. Contemporary pressures: why cultural revival is urgent

6.1 Climate change, erosion, displacement: “culture loss through geography loss”

When settlements erode or relocate, cultural institutions (shrines, performance circuits, seasonal fairs) fracture. Reporting from Sagar Island highlights erosion threatening settlements and local shrine life around Bonbibi, implying how climate impacts can disrupt cultural continuity.

6.2 Conservation and access regimes

Protected forest governance shapes what can be practiced where; cultural forms often arose around forest access and occupational rituals. If access becomes restricted without cultural dialogue, traditions can be delegitimized rather than transformed.

6.3 Market change and media homogenization

Younger generations encounter mainstream entertainment; local performance loses economic viability unless linked to livelihood pathways.

7. Framework for NGO-led cultural revival in Sundarban

This section is written explicitly from the position of a **cultural wing head** designing a revival program that respects both tradition and future livelihoods.

7.1 Guiding principles

1. **Community ownership:** performers, shrine committees, fishers, honey collectors, women ritual specialists lead documentation and decision-making.
2. **Do-no-harm conservation alignment:** cultural revival must not encourage illegal extraction; it should support coexistence ethics and safety.
3. **Intergenerational transmission:** focus on schools, apprenticeships, and digital archives.
4. **Culture-as-adaptation:** integrate disaster preparedness and environmental education into festivals and performances.

7.2 A “Cultural Revival Portfolio” (programmable components)

A. Documentation & archiving (Year 1–2)

- **Oral history atlas:** record narratives of Bonbibi, Dakshin Rai, Gazi, Manasa; map where stories are told and during which seasons. (Justified by scholarship emphasizing oral history and TEK documentation.)
- **Performance archive:** audio-video recording of palagaan/jatra; script and song transcription; performer biographies; instrument documentation.
- **Manuscript micro-archive:** photograph and catalog handwritten *pala* manuscripts (with community consent), in partnership with local colleges.

B. Transmission & education (Year 1–3)

- **School culture clubs:** Bhatiyali/boat-song circle; “delta storytelling” clubs; craft and mask-making (where relevant).
- **Apprenticeship fellowships:** pay young apprentices to learn palagaan/jatra from senior performers (reverse the economic decline problem).

C. Revival performances with integrity (Year 2–5)

- **Community palagaan circuits** (not only tourism shows): revive ritual performance calendars aligned with local festivals and ecological seasons.
- **Manasa “health + safety” integration**: embed snakebite prevention, first aid, and seasonal risk messaging into Manasa pala gatherings.
- **Bonbibí “coexistence” dialogues**: performances followed by moderated discussions with forest department, NGOs, and community groups—turn culture into a negotiation platform.

D. Cultural livelihoods and ethical cultural tourism (Year 2–5)

- Link crafts and performances to verified markets while protecting meaning and rights.
- A contemporary example of cultural programming is the SundeRhythm festival highlighting crafts and performance traditions under UNESCO-oriented initiatives (useful model for partnership and visibility).

Safeguards: community contracts, fair payments, consent-based recording, and “no sacred content without permission.”

8. Conclusion

Sundarban culture is a long, living conversation between human settlement and mangrove-tidal ecology. Its written and oral histories—Johuranama traditions, Raymangal/Dakshin Rai narratives, Bonbibí palagaan, Manasa pala, and river songs—are not simply folklore; they are adaptive knowledge, moral economy, and social glue in a high-risk landscape. Cultural revival therefore should not be framed as nostalgia. It should be framed as **resilience infrastructure**: sustaining identity, strengthening community cooperation, and creating ethical cultural livelihoods while supporting disaster readiness and conservation dialogue.

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