

SACRED LANDSCAPES AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF FOLK RELIGION IN MALDA DISTRICT, WEST BENGAL

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Abstract

Sacred landscapes are an important dimension of lived religion in which communities ascribe religious, cultural, emotional, and historical significance to particular places. Sacredness in rural settings is not only related to formally institutionalised temples or religious buildings; but also to village shrines, sacred trees, ponds, rivers, ritual grounds, ancestral places and places inscribed in local myths and oral traditions. The present article explores the relation between sacred landscapes and collective identity through a sociological study of folk religion in Malda district of West Bengal. The study conceptualises folk religion as a cultural system of everyday life as expressed in local deities, ritual practices, oral narratives, folk performances, healing traditions, sacred ecology, and community festivals.

The research adopts an ethnographically including participant observation, narrative interviews, oral histories, informal conversations, sacred-landscape mapping, and a structured survey component. Village shrines, worship of Maa Manasa, beliefs related to trees and rivers, folk healing practices, performance traditions of Gambhira, sacred practices of tribals/Santal are some of the areas that receive special attention. The analysis is informed by Durkheim's notions of the sacred and collective effervescence, Geertz's interpretive approach to religion, Turner's idea of *communitas*, Bourdieu's theory of habitus and symbolic reproduction and Douglas's analysis of social boundaries and purity.

The study argues that sacred landscapes are socially constructed spaces of collective memory and identity. Culturally meaningful places are created out of ordinary geographical locations through ritual repetition, storytelling and emotional attachment. Sacred landscapes provide communities with material and symbolic points of reference, through which belonging is expressed as 'our place', 'our deity', 'our ritual', and 'our tradition'. At the same time, sacred spaces are not socially neutral: participation and access are shaped by gender, caste, age, class, religious affiliation, and ritual authority. Processes of modernisation, migration, environmental change, institutionalisation and digital media are changing landscapes, but this does not necessarily detract from their social significance. Rather, folk religion is being reconfigured in the conditions of changing society. The paper argues that sacred landscapes provide a useful sociological framework to comprehend the interplay of religion, collective identity, memory, ecology and social change in rural Bengal.

Keywords: Sacred landscape, folk religion, collective identity, ritual, social memory, sacred ecology, folk culture.

1. Introduction

Folk Religion plays a major role in the social and cultural life of rural India. But religious life cannot be adequately understood simply in terms of formal institutions, sacred texts, or organised religious authorities. “Everyday religion often takes place outside institutional settings, and is located in ordinary social and geographical settings. Ritual activity and collective memory can be focused on a village tree, a pond, a roadside shrine, a riverbank, an agricultural field or an ancestral site.

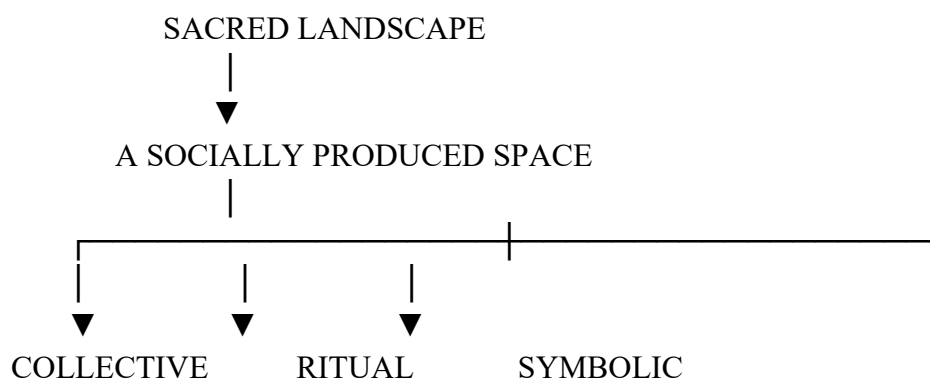
Sites of this kind prove that religion is also a spatial phenomenon. “Human beings do not see geographical space as a simple physical territory. Social interaction, memory, symbolism, and cultural practice make meaningful space. Sacred places are those with which a community associates divine power, the presence of ancestors, protection, fertility, healing or historical memory. Thus sacredness is a social product.

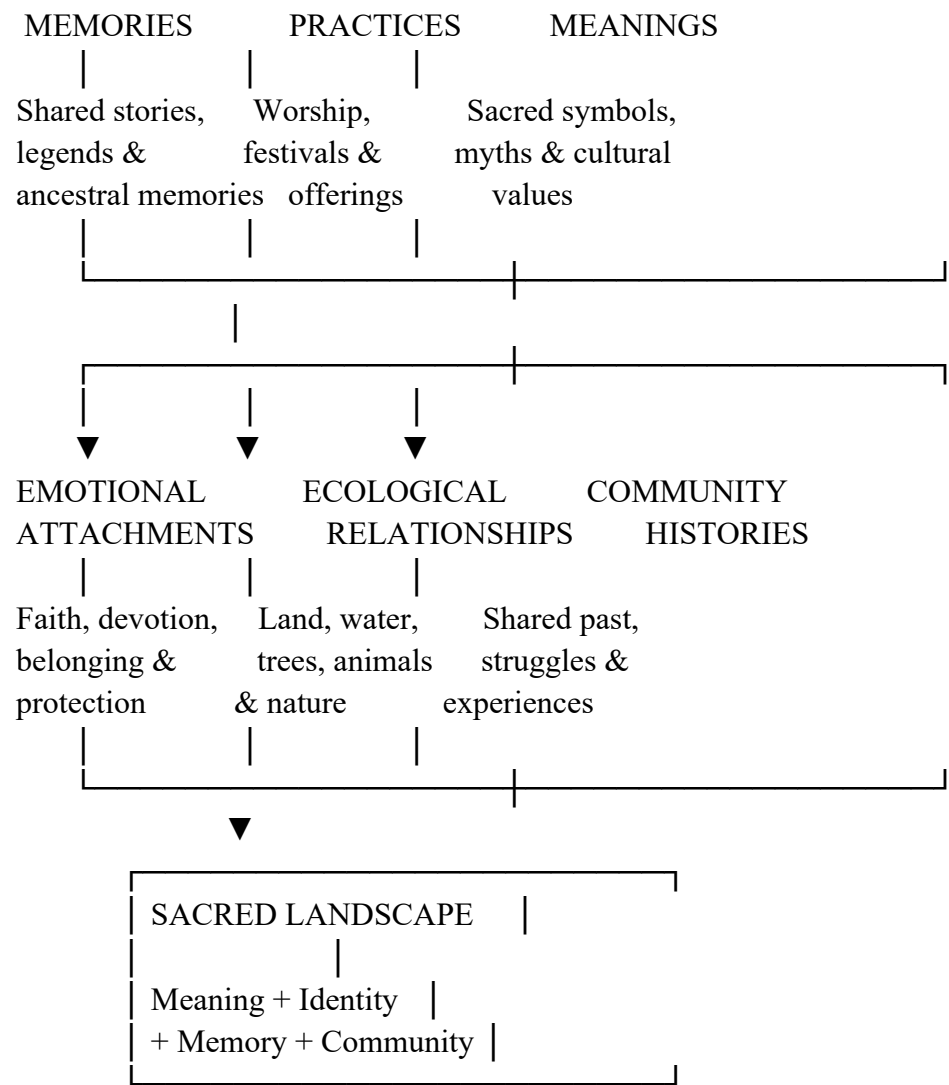
The relationship of religion and place is especially important in the Malda district of West Bengal. Malda has a very complex cultural scenario, influenced by agriculture, rivers, mangoes, historical settlements, migration and different religious traditions. The district administration considers Gambhira as an important element of the folk culture of Malda and stresses the importance of the riverine and agrarian environment of the district.

The religious scene of rural Malda is not confined to formally organised religious institutions. Everyday religious life is constituted by local shrines, folk deities, sacred trees, ponds, river-related rituals, folk healing practices, seasonal festivals, oral narratives and performance traditions.

The notion of folk religion is a useful framework for studying these practices. Folk religion is not a lesser or more rudimentary form of institutional religion. In this study, folk religion is conceived of as lived religion, a dynamic system of practices and meanings by which people make sense of their social and environmental worlds.

The concept of sacred landscape also assists in understanding the embedding of religion in place.





The central argument of this article is that sacred landscapes function as social institutions of collective memory and identity. Through ritual participation and repeated interaction, communities reproduce a shared sense of belonging.

The article therefore examines the relationship between sacred landscapes and collective identity in Malda and explores how folk religious practices respond to changing social, ecological, and cultural conditions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Sociology of Religion and Folk Religion

Classical sociology established religion as a key domain for understanding social order, solidarity, and meaning.

Durkheim (1912/1995) conceptualised religion through the distinction between the sacred and the profane and argued that collective ritual contributes to social solidarity. His approach remains relevant for understanding how communities designate certain objects and places as sacred.

Weber (1963), in contrast, emphasised the subjective meanings attached to religious action. Religious behaviour cannot be understood without examining the interpretations of social actors.

These classical perspectives provide complementary insights into folk religion.

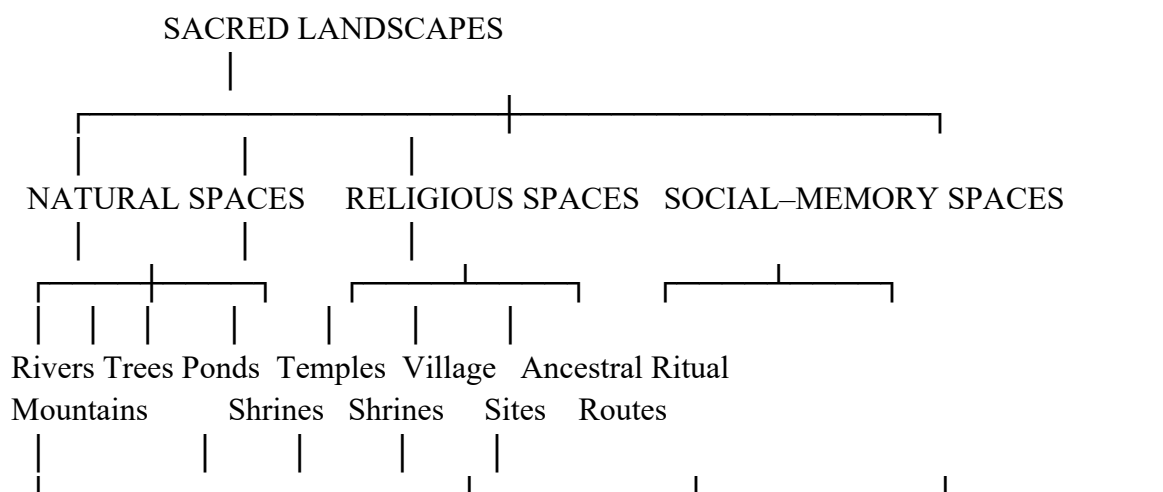
Durkheim highlights collective ritual. Weber highlights meaning. However, folk religion requires additional attention to everyday practice.

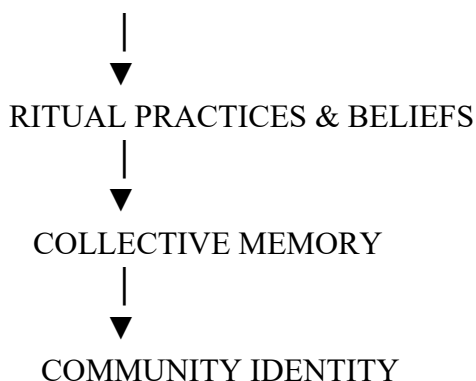
Folk religion is not necessarily organised through formal doctrine. It is often transmitted through family, locality, oral tradition, ritual specialists, and repeated participation. The study of lived religion has therefore challenged the assumption that religion can be adequately understood through formal institutions alone.

2.2 Sacred Space and Sacred Landscape

The distinction between space and place is central to the study of sacred landscapes. A geographical location becomes a meaningful place when communities attach memory and significance to it.

Eck's work on Hindu sacred geography demonstrates how places are interconnected through mythology, pilgrimage, and cultural memory. Sacred geography is thus both spatial and symbolic.





The significance of sacred landscapes lies not in physical form alone but in socially constructed meanings.

2.3 Religion, Landscape, and Memory

Memory is a crucial component of sacred landscapes. Halbwachs's concept of collective memory provides a useful framework for understanding how memory is socially organised. Memory is not merely individual; it is produced and sustained through social groups.

Sacred places provide powerful frameworks for memory because they anchor abstract recollections in physical space. An elderly resident may recall a deceased relative through a shrine. A community may remember earlier settlements through a sacred tree. Festivals may preserve intergenerational memory.

Sacred landscapes therefore function as spatial repositories of collective memory.

2.4 Folk Religion and Ecology

Folk religious practices often establish close relationships between humans and the natural environment. Sacred trees, rivers, ponds, and forests may acquire religious significance. Such practices have been examined in relation to sacred groves, indigenous ecological knowledge, and environmental conservation.

Recent research on Adivasi sacred groves in India highlights the intersection of sacred landscapes, gender, indigenous knowledge, and cultural identity. This perspective is particularly relevant to Malda, where riverine ecology, agriculture, and folk religion are closely interconnected.

2.5 West Bengal's Folk Religious Traditions

West Bengal has a long tradition of folk religious practices associated with local deities, seasonal festivals, oral narratives, songs, and performances.

Maa Manasa worship exemplifies the intersection of deity, environment, gender, and agrarian life. Gambhira represents another significant tradition. Research on Gambhira has examined its relationship with folk culture, Shaivite traditions, agriculture, and the social life of Malda, as well as its recognition as intangible cultural heritage. Research Studies have also explored the relationship between mango culture and Gambhira folklore, demonstrating the integration of ecology and cultural expression.

These works establish that folk religion in Bengal is deeply embedded in local ecological and social contexts.

2.6 Religion, Identity, and Social Change

Religion contributes to collective identity by producing shared symbols, memories, and practices. However, identity is dynamic. Migration, education, urbanisation, mass media, and digital technologies reshape the transmission of traditions.

Recent research on sacred landscapes among indigenous communities shows that ritual spaces can serve as sites for negotiating cultural continuity under conditions of transformation.

This is particularly relevant to Malda, where younger generations engage with village traditions alongside modern educational and digital environments.

3. Research Gap

Existing scholarship provides valuable insights into religion, sacred geography, folk culture, ecology, and collective identity. However, three key gaps remain.

First

Sacred landscapes in India have often been studied through major pilgrimage centres, with limited attention to small rural sacred spaces such as village shrines, sacred trees, and ponds.

Second

Folk religion has frequently been examined as folklore or ritual practice, with insufficient sociological focus on its spatial dimensions and identity formation.

4. Objectives and Research Questions

4.1 Objectives -

The study has six principal objectives:

1. To identify and analyse sacred landscapes associated with folk religion in Malda district.
2. To examine beliefs, rituals, narratives, and practices associated with sacred places.
3. To explore the role of sacred landscapes in collective memory and identity formation.
4. To examine the relationship between folk religion and the natural environment.
5. To assess transformations in sacred landscapes under conditions of social change.

4.2 Research Questions

1. How do ordinary spaces become sacred landscapes?
2. What folk religious practices are associated with sacred places in Malda?
3. How do sacred landscapes contribute to collective identity?
4. How are traditions transmitted across generations?
5. What roles do women and elderly members play in cultural continuity?
6. How do sacred landscapes mediate human–environment relations?

5. Theoretical Framework

The study adopts a multidimensional theoretical framework.

5.1 Durkheim: Sacred and Profane

Durkheim explains how communities collectively designate sacred objects and places, generating social solidarity through ritual.

5.2 Geertz: Symbolic Meaning

Geertz enables interpretation of sacred landscapes as systems of culturally embedded symbols.

5.3 Turner: Communitas

Turner's concept explains collective emotional experience in ritual contexts, while acknowledging persistent social inequalities.

5.4 Bourdieu: Habitus

Ritual practices are reproduced through embodied learning and socialisation, becoming habitual over time.

5.5 Douglas: Boundaries

Sacred spaces produce and reflect social boundaries, including distinctions of caste, gender, age, and ritual authority.

6. Research Methodology

6.1 Research Design

The study employs an ethnographically informed mixed-method approach.

6.2 Methods

The study adopted an ethnographic approach in which the researcher spent considerable time within the field to understand folk religion as it is lived and experienced by community members. Participant observation formed the central method of the study. The researcher observed rituals, festivals, worship, offerings, village gatherings, and everyday interactions around sacred places. This direct involvement helped to understand not only what people do, but also why particular practices are meaningful to them.

Narrative interviews were conducted with villagers, devotees, ritual practitioners, elders, women, and other community members. Their personal stories provided insights into faith, memory, emotion, and changing religious practices. Oral histories were particularly useful in documenting stories about ancestors, village deities, sacred trees, rivers, shrines, and the transformation of traditions over generations. Many important details also emerged through informal conversations, often during everyday activities such as sitting in courtyards, visiting shrines, attending festivals, or walking through the village.

The researcher also prepared sacred-landscape maps to locate shrines, temples, ponds, rivers, trees, ritual spaces, and other culturally significant places. A structured survey was used to supplement the qualitative findings with demographic and behavioural information. Photographs, field notes, and other visual documentation helped preserve the material and spatial dimensions of religious life. Finally, the field materials were organised through thematic and interpretive analysis, focusing on recurring themes of sacredness, memory, identity, community, ecology, ritual, and social change.

6.3 Sampling

Purposive and snowball sampling were used to identify key informants, including ritual specialists, elders, women practitioners, performers, and community members.

6.4 Ethnographic Approach

Rituals were studied in situ, with attention to spatial organisation, participation, symbolism, and social interaction.

6.5 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic, narrative, symbolic, and spatial analytical techniques

7. Study Area

Malda district, located in middle West Bengal, is characterised by a riverine and agrarian landscape shaped by the Ganga and its tributaries. The region includes agricultural fields, mango orchards, rivers, ponds, and rural settlements, alongside diverse cultural and religious communities. The study focuses on rural sacred landscapes rather than formal heritage sites, emphasising everyday religious spaces that are often absent from official documentation.

8. Findings

The research findings of the present study indicate that folk religion in Malda district is not just a set of isolated beliefs, rituals or supernatural practices. Rather, it is a dynamic social and cultural system where communities interpret their surroundings, remember their past, organise social relationships, negotiate uncertainty, and reproduce collective identities. Ethnographic observations and narratives suggest that sacredness is continuously produced through everyday practices, oral traditions, participation in rituals, relationships with the environment, and collective recognition. Below, the major findings are discussed.

8.1 Sacredness as a Social Process

A significant finding from the study is that sacredness is not necessarily an intrinsic property of a particular object, place, tree, river or shrine. It is socially produced and reproduced thru collective memory, ritual practices, narratives, emotional attachment and community recognition. A tree is made sacred in the memory of generations of people who identify it with a deity, ancestor memory, protection or ritual activity. In the same way, a specific pond, riverbank, shrine or pathway becomes sacred when people perform rituals and tell stories related to it over and over again.

The ethnographic evidence suggests that sacredness is a relational phenomenon. It lives in the connection between people, places, memories and practices. The meaning of a sacred site may also change over time, as new generations reinterpret the traditions they inherit.

8.2 Sacred Places as Memory Stores

Sacred places are important repositories of collective memory. Village shrines, old trees, ponds, riverbanks, temples and ancestral spaces often hold memories of migrations, settlement, family histories, environmental changes, epidemics, conflicts and significant community events. Oral narratives around these places allow the older generations to pass on historical experiences to the younger generations.

In this sense sacred landscapes act as informal archives. These archives are not kept in written historical documents but in stories, rituals, songs, festivals and everyday conversations. The

disappearance or transformation of a sacred place may therefore signify not just a physical environmental change, but also a weakening of a community's collective memory.

8.3 Social Organization of Village Shrines

Village shrines were found to have other functions apart from religious worship. They often function as informal social institutions where people meet, exchange information, negotiate relationships, and participate in collective activities. Ritual occasions bring together people from different families, occupations and social backgrounds.

The shrine thus becomes a space of communication and social cohesion. Shared rituals can strengthen a sense of belonging and shared responsibility. At the same time, access to and participation in shrine activities might reflect existing social hierarchies. Such village shrines both reproduce aspects of social structure and create opportunities for community interaction.

8.4 Sacred Trees and Ecological Sustainability

Sacred trees are an important link between folk religion and ecological consciousness. Trees associated with deities, ancestors, spirits or protective powers are usually respected and not casually cut down. The ritual restrictions on such trees may indirectly preserve them.

However, the study also shows that traditional ecological values are increasingly being threatened by urbanisation, road construction, agricultural expansion, population growth and changing patterns of land-use. The sanctity of a tree may offer some protection, but it does not always prevent environmental degradation. Sacred-tree traditions therefore illustrate the possibilities and limits of culturally embedded environmental ethics.

8.5 Devi Maa Manasa Pooja

Devi Maa Manasa worship offers a particularly important example of the relationship between folk religion, ecological uncertainty, and everyday vulnerability. The goddess is strongly linked with snakes, fertility, protection and the natural world. In the countryside, the encounter with snakes and other environmental risks is not only a matter of scientific or medical categories, but also can be interpreted in terms of religious narratives and ritual practices.

Devi Maa Manasa worship thus provides emotional and cultural means of coping with uncertainty. Rituals, vows, offerings, stories, and festivals offer devotees a framework through which danger can be understood and managed. The persistence of Manasa worship demonstrates folk religion's ability to adjust to changing social circumstances while maintaining its symbolic link to nature.

8.6 Rivers and Sacred Meanings

Rivers (Mahananda, Ganga, Tangan, Behula) occupy a curious place in the sacred geography of Malda. They are simultaneously sources of livelihood, ecological resources, agents of environmental risk and culturally meaningful entities. Riverbanks are associated with worship, festivals, ancestral memories, cleansing rituals and local stories.

At the same time, around the areas near Ganga river, land erosion, flooding, displacement and changes in river courses create experiences of uncertainty and loss. The river is thus not merely a physical geographical object but a social and emotional being. Its shifting course can transform settlement patterns, livelihoods, memories and sacred geography. This illustrates the close connection between environmental processes and forms of social and cultural sphere.

8.7 Gambhira and the Social Expression

Gambhira became an important cultural medium for communities to express social concerns in an accessible and performative form. Associated with religious and folk-cultural traditions, Gambhira often transcends ritual devotion and addresses issues of poverty, corruption, social inequality, political eagerness, family problems, environmental concerns and changing social values.

Humour, satire, dialogue, music and performance enable sensitive issues to be communicated within a culturally familiar framework. Gambhira thus becomes a sort of folk sociology where common people comment on their own society. Its importance is not only in that it preserves culture but also that it can interpret and critique social change.

8.8 Women and the Transmission of Tradition

Women were important cultural transmitters in the folk-religious system. Women often maintain domestic rituals, vows, folk songs, storytelling, seasonal observances, food practices, and family-based folk religious oral traditions.

Indigenous Ritual knowledge is usually transmitted from woman to woman rather than via institutional modern education. Mothers, grandmothers and older female relatives teach younger members the meanings, procedures, stories and taboos related to specific practices. Hence, the continuity of folk religion is intimately linked with women's daily cultural labour. Their contribution demonstrates that religious transmission takes place not only in formal religious institutions but also in households and close social and kin relationships.

8.9 Change Across Generations

The results suggest that younger generations are not completely rejecting or accepting tradition. Rather they are selectively engaging with inherited practices. Some young people still participate in festivals and rituals because of family expectations, emotional ties, or community identity, while some others reinterpret these practices through modern education, migration, science, media and digital technology.

Social media and digital platforms have created new spaces for the representation of folk traditions. Ritual performances, Gambhira songs, festivals and local cultural practices can now go out of the village. This results in a double process of transformation: some traditional meanings may weaken while cultural practices may at the same time gain new visibility and audiences.

8.10 Syncretism

Finally, the study illustrates the coexistence and interaction of different religious and cultural traditions in the sacred landscape. The same festivals, local shrines, cultural performances, healing practices, and sacred spaces can cause interaction among communities but do not necessarily obliterate their distinctive religious identities.

In this sense, therefore, syncretism should not be understood as a total fusion of religions. Instead it is a process of cultural negotiation, coexistence, borrowing, adaptation and shared participation. The sacred landscape becomes a place where different communities meet and develop practical forms of cultural interaction.

In sum, the evidence suggests that folk religion in Malda is better understood as a living social process than as a static cultural relic. It connects memory to place, ritual to identity, religion to ecology, and tradition to social change. Its enduring significance is that it can change and still remain meaningfully connected to community history, environment, and everyday life.

9. Discussion

Sacred landscapes function as multi-layered social systems.

Micro-level: personal emotion and experience

Meso level: rituals and organization of community

Macro level: structural forces like modernisation, migration

These levels come together to form fluid religious settings.

10. Spiritual landscape and collective identity

The relationship, thru sacred landscapes, holds collective identity:

place → memory → ritual → emotion → belonging

Statements of ownership like “our shrine” have deep sociological meanings of identity, continuity and belonging.

11. Social Inequality and Sacred Landscape

Sacred spaces can reproduce social hierarchies of caste, gender, class and ritual authority. They generate equality and inequality at the same time.

12. Modernity and Change

Folk religion does not disappear, but adapts to modern conditions thru changes in ritual practice, communication and participation. It proposes a shift from viewing folk religion as survival to understanding it as adaptive transformation.

13. Sociological Contribution

The study contributes to:

- Sacred landscape as social institution
- Memory and identity formation
- Environmental sociology of religion
- Adaptive theories of tradition

14. Conclusion

While doing the research, Sacred landscapes in Malda represent socially produced spaces where memory, ritual, ecology, and identity converge. They are not confined to formal religious institutions but are embedded in everyday indigenous environments such as trees, rivers, ponds, shrines, and oral narratives. These landscapes connect past and present, people and place, religion and ecology, and tradition and modernity. They also reflect social inequalities while simultaneously fostering collective belonging.

From the sociological perspective, rather than disappearing under modernisation, folk religion is being reconfigured through new social and technological conditions. The key sociological question is therefore not whether tradition persists, but how it is transformed. Sacred landscapes remain central to this transformation, functioning as living institutions through which communities continuously produce meaning, memory, and identity.

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