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(Re)Thinking Environment as Shongshar: Deconstructing the Universal through Rituals of Bengal

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Abstract

This paper delves into the intricate concept of Bengali shongshar (সংসার), exploring it as the phenomenology of the home and the dynamic dialogue between the home and the external world. Emphasizing the performative aspect of life through rites and rituals, the study investigates how these practices establish culturally strategic approaches to engage and negotiate with the non-human world around us. Contrary to the Enlightenment view of Nature as a universal category, the paper advocates for a nuanced understanding by examining specific folk rituals, thereby offering insights that are less general and less universal. The Western colonial knowledge system is deconstructed with the help of indigenous knowledge system. The nature–culture dichotomy is scrutinized through the lens of popular philosophy, which prioritizes an interactive paradigm, emphasizing the dialectics of shared ancestry, coexistence, co-evaluation, and agentic assemblage rather than binary notions of domination and conflict. Focusing on the quotidian home rituals of Bengal, with a specific emphasis on *Sondhey dewa* (evening rites) and *Manasa* Rituals of riverine Bengal, the paper analyzes how ritualization serves as the catalyst for initiating human-other interactions. These rituals act as both “models for” and “models of" reality, shaping the social and psychological perception of the environment within the communities inhabiting these regions.

Keywords: Brata-katha (ritual narratives), folk-religion, performance, phenomenology, sacralization