



## **The Calcified Sacred: Displaced Indexicality and the Erosion of Vernacular Environmentalism in the Folk Traditions of Rarh Bengal**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper investigates the shifting religio-cultural landscape of Rarh Bengal, focusing on the "eco-semiotic" evolution of folk deities such as Dharmaraj, Manasa, and the Garam spirits. While traditional scholarship has primarily analyzed these cults through the lens of Sanskritization or philological evolution, this study identifies a significant research gap regarding the de-coupling of deity from ecology in the Anthropocene. Utilizing a stratified fieldwork sample of 45 individuals across nine villages in Burdwan, Bankura, and Birbhum, the research employs data triangulation to compare "Ritual Ideals" (the Signified) with "Modern Realities" (the Signifier). The findings reveal a state of "Displaced Indexicality," where the material components of ritual—sacred clay, forest groves, and riverine hydrology—are being replaced by synthetic, urbanized substitutes like concrete and borewell water. Drawing upon the theoretical framework of Vernacular Environmentalism, the paper argues that the "Museumification" of Rarh's traditions by State and local bodies strips these deities of their functional role as ecological guardians. The study concludes that the transition from open-air *Thans* to Brahmanical-style concrete temples signifies not just a religious shift, but an ontological loss of the Rarh's unique lateritic identity. By re-centering the Environmental Humanities, this paper advocates for a recognition of folk deities as active agents of subaltern resistance against the homogenizing forces of globalized religious nationalism.

**Keywords:** Eco-Semiotics, Vernacular Environmentalism, Displaced Indexicality, Anthropocene Religion, Rarh Bengal Folk Deities, Sanskritization and Subaltern Theology, Museumification of Folk Traditions, Environmental Humanities.

## **Introduction: The Red Soil and the Sacred**

The lateritic landscape of Rarh Bengal—a topographical frontier bridging the Chota Nagpur plateau and the Gangetic delta—is not merely a geographical entity but a site of profound ontological negotiation. Within this "Red Soil" (*Lal Mati*), the religiocultural tradition is defined by the endurance of folk deities such as Dharmaraj, Manasa, and Bhadu. Unlike the transcendental deities of Brahmanical Puranas, these autochthonous figures are intensely localized, embodying the material anxieties of an agrarian society. Historically, scholarship on Rarh has been dominated by the Sanskritization model, popularized by M.N. Srinivas and applied to Bengal by Asutosh Bhattacharya. This lens views folk traditions as "lower" forms perpetually striving for Vedic legitimacy through the *Mangalkavyas*. However, such a linear progression ignores what Jawhar Sircar identifies as the construction of a hybrid identity, where tribal (Austrian) roots and Buddhist vestiges merged to form a defiant subaltern theology. These deities do not merely represent "folkloric fossils"; they are active agents in a liminal space where the binary of "elite" and "marginal" collapses. Despite extensive philological mapping of narrative poems, a significant research gap remains regarding the eco-semiotics of these cults in the Anthropocene. As the Rarh region undergoes rapid industrialization and "museumification" for cultural tourism, the organic link between the deity and the ecology is being severed. This paper seeks to move beyond traditional structuralism to explore how these deities function as vernacular resistances against the homogenizing forces of modern religious nationalism, reasserting the Rarh as a unique, non-Vedic epicenter of Bengali consciousness. The eco-semiotic gap in Rarh Bengal's religious scholarship lies in the transition of folk deities from functional "ecological guardians" to aestheticized cultural symbols. While traditional studies by scholars like Asutosh Bhattacharya or Sukumar Sen focused on the philological evolution of the *Mangalkavyas*, they often overlooked the deity as a semiotic signifier of the physical landscape. In Rarh, the deity is not an abstract entity but is indexed to specific

environmental markers: the *Than* (sacred grove), the lateritic soil, and the seasonal hydrology of rivers like the Ajay or Damodar. Scholarship has long utilized M.N. Srinivas's concept of "Sanskritization" to explain how local cults were absorbed into the Puranic fold. However, as Jawhar Sircar argues in *The Construction of Hindu Identity in Medieval Western Bengal*, this process was less about theological promotion and more about the "geo-social mapping" of a frontier (Sircar 13-15). The research gap emerges here: modern industrialization and the "museumification" of Rarh—often driven by the tourism of the "Baul-Fakir" or "Chhau" circuits—have stripped these deities of their ecological agency. When a *Dharmaraj* stone or a *Manasa* pot is moved from a village shrine to a urban festival stage, the semiotic link to the soil is broken. Future research must engage with what Ralph Nicholas describes as the "confluence of nature and culture" in Bengal's rituals, but updated for the Anthropocene (Nicholas 72). We must ask: how does the depletion of Rarh's forests and the commercialization of its "Red Soil" identity affect the *vratas* (rituals) that once functioned as local conservation strategies? This requires a move toward Environmental Humanities, viewing the folk deity not as a relic of the past, but as a site of contemporary "vernacular environmentalism."

### **Research Gap: From Sanskritization to Eco-Semiotic Erosion**

Despite the rich corpus of literature dedicated to the religiocultural landscape of Rarh Bengal, existing scholarship remains largely confined to two dominant paradigms that fail to address the region's current ecological and ontological crisis. The first, a philological-literary approach, focuses on the medieval *Mangalkavyas*, treating folk deities like Manasa and Chandi as textual subjects in the historical process of "Aryanization" (Bhattacharya 2005). The second, a sociological-historical approach, views the region through the lens of Sanskritization, where local cults are analyzed primarily as subaltern groups seeking upward mobility within a

Brahmanical hierarchy (Sircar 13). While these frameworks effectively map the social "climb" of deities like Dharmaraj, they suffer from a significant anthropocentric bias, neglecting the deities' fundamental roles as indexical signifiers of the lateritic environment.

The critical research gap identified in this study lies in the de-coupling of deity from ecology, a phenomenon accelerated by the Anthropocene but ignored by traditional structuralist readings. Existing research frequently treats the "sacred grove" (*Than*) or the "sacred river" (Ajay/Damodar) as mere backdrops for ritual, rather than active, semiotic components of a Vernacular Environmentalism. As Ramachandra Guha and Joan Martinez-Alier argue, environmentalism in the Global South is often embedded in the lived experience of the subaltern; yet, in the context of Rarh, there is a profound lack of scholarship documenting how the degradation of the "Red Soil" (*Lal Mati*) directly constitutes a degradation of the folk-theological essence.

Furthermore, contemporary studies have failed to theorize the "Crisis of Displaced Indexicality"—the transition where a deity shifts from being a physical index of the land (e.g., a stone from a specific riverbed) to a symbolic artifact housed in a "sanitized" concrete temple. While Jawhar Sircar hints at the "construction of Hindu identity" through the sterilization of local cults, the specific material shift from organic ritual elements (ant-hill clay, wild flora) to industrial substitutes (cement, plastic, borewell water) remains unexamined in its semiotic capacity (Sircar 42). This study addresses this lacuna by moving beyond the "museumification" of Rarh's traditions. It identifies a pedagogical and scholarly failure to recognize the Ethno-Ecological agency of folk deities. By triangulating data across generations—specifically noting the shift in the youth's perception of gods as "heritage" rather than "habitat"—this paper identifies a gap in understanding how environmental resilience is lost when rituals are abstracted from their ecological referents. This research asserts that without a transition toward an Environmental Humanities framework, the scholarship will continue to view Rarh's deities

as "folkloric relics," missing their vital function as the last standing markers of a vanishing, vernacular resistance against globalized, ecological homogeneity.

To bridge the gap between abstract theory and the "lived" reality of Rarh Bengal, my fieldwork moved beyond mere ritual description. I was looking for the Eco-Semiotic link: how the physical environment (soil, trees, water) is encoded into the deity, and how modern changes (industrialization, loss of sacred groves) are "de-coding" that tradition.

Here is the used structured fieldwork questionnaire designed for the villages of Burdwan, Bankura, and Birbhum.

### **Fieldwork Questionnaire: The Eco-Semiotics of Folk Cults**

#### **I. Mapping the "Sacred Geography" (Spatiality)**

- The Than (Shrine) Location: Is the deity's shrine (*Than*) located under a specific tree (Santal, Peepal, or Neem)? Has the footprint of this grove shrunk due to construction or farming in the last 20 years?
- Materiality of the Icon: For deities like *Dharmaraj* or *Manasa*, is the ritual object (stone, clay pot, or wood) sourced from a specific local pond or field?
- The "Lal Mati" Connection: In Bankura/Birbhum, how does the specific texture or color of the local red soil feature in the preparation of the *Gajan* or *Nabanna* altar?

#### **II. Seasonal Ecology and Ritual Timing (Phenology)**

- The Hydrological Cycle: During the *Gajan* (usually mid-April), how has the drying up of local rivers/ponds affected the "snan" (ritual bathing) of the deity?
- Agricultural Semiotics: In the *Nabanna* (New Harvest) rituals of Burdwan, are specific "folk" rice varieties required for the deity that are no longer grown

commercially? If "high-yield" seeds are used, does the community feel the "potency" of the ritual has changed?

- Flora and Fauna: Are specific wild flowers or fruits (like the *Shulni* or *Aura*) disappearing from the ritual landscape? What substitutes are being used?

### III. The "Museumification" vs. Living Tradition (Social Change)

- The Tourist Gaze: Does your village receive "cultural tourists" or researchers during *Rash* or *Gajan*? Does the presence of cameras change the way the *Sanyasis* (devotees) perform their penance?
- Commercial Shift: Are the terracotta horses or *Manasa-ghats* (pots) now made primarily for sale to city-dwellers rather than for ritual "sacrifice" at the *Than*?
- Youth Perception: Do the younger generation see the deity as a "Guardian of the Land" or merely as a "Cultural Heritage" of their ancestors?

### IV. Post-Colonial/Modern Erasure

- Industrial Encroachment: (Specific to Birbhum/Burdwan mining belts) Has a local shrine been moved or destroyed due to coal mining or stone quarrying? How did the community "re-locate" the spirit of the land?
- Climate Anxiety: Do the villagers attribute recent droughts or erratic monsoons to the "displeasure" of the folk deity?

## **Fieldwork Analysis: The Desiccated Sacred—Eco-Semiotic Erosion in Rarh Bengal**

The fieldwork conducted across nine villages in the districts of Purba Bardhaman, Bankura, and Birbhum provides a revealing empirical framework for understanding the eco-semiotic erosion of folk religiosity in Rarh Bengal. Through a stratified qualitative sample of forty-five respondents, the research identifies a widening "Eco-Semiotic Gap" between ritual memory

and ecological practice. The respondents included farmers, temple priests, housewives, school students, and members of local Panchayat bodies, allowing the study to capture both generational and institutional perspectives. Across interviews and site inspections, a recurring pattern of “Disrupted Indexicality” emerges. Ritual elements that historically functioned as indexical signs—clay from ant-hills, water from specific rivers, and sacred groves—are increasingly replaced by standardized, market-derived substitutes. In classical semiotic terms, the index—once physically tied to the landscape—is becoming a symbolic marker devoid of ecological referent. Consequently, the sacred geography of Rarh is undergoing a subtle but profound transformation in which ritual persists while its environmental substratum gradually disappears.

A particularly striking dimension of the field data is the divergence between oral memory and material practice. Interviews with five farmers and six temple priests consistently invoked what respondents described as the “Ritual Ideal.” Priests associated with seasonal rites such as Gajan emphasized that ritual purity depended upon ecologically specific materials: Kush grass, riverine silt, and soil collected from termite mounds. These materials were historically believed to embody the vitality of the local terrain and therefore served as essential conduits through which folk deities such as Dharmaraj and Garam Thakur manifested their power. However, the physical inspection of shrine sites (Than) revealed a markedly different reality. Many once-open sacred groves have been replaced by concrete plinths, tiled enclosures, and cement structures, often constructed with the support of local political committees or development funds. While these new temples enhance visual permanence and public visibility, they simultaneously sever the deity’s organic connection to the surrounding ecosystem. The sacred grove that once functioned as a micro-biome protected by ritual taboo gradually loses its ecological significance once the deity is relocated into an architectural enclosure. In this sense, the fieldwork demonstrates that ritual continuity masks an underlying ecological discontinuity.

The interviews with five village housewives offer a particularly granular view of the transformation of biodiversity-based ritual practice. Women often function as custodians of seasonal agricultural rituals, especially those connected to harvest festivals such as Nabanna and Poush Parbon. Traditionally these festivals symbolized a communion between ancestral seed varieties and the ritual life of the household. The rice offered to the deity during Nabanna was historically drawn from indigenous varieties such as Kanakchur or Radhuni Pagal, grains deeply embedded within the agricultural ecology of the lateritic plains. However, the field interviews reveal that these indigenous cultivars have largely disappeared from local cultivation due to the spread of high-yield varieties such as “Sita” and “Swarna.” From a semiotic perspective, this shift represents a disjunction between the ritual signifier and its ecological signified. The ritual offering of rice persists as a symbolic gesture, but the crop itself no longer embodies the unique soil conditions of Rarh. What remains is a semiotically hollow sign, where the outward form of ritual survives even as its ecological depth erodes.

Equally significant is the generational transformation observed among the fifteen school students included in the sample. Students from Classes VIII to XII demonstrated familiarity with the names of local deities and festivals, yet their interpretations were largely framed through the language of heritage, tourism, and cultural identity rather than ecological stewardship. Many associated festivals like Rash Utsav or Gajan with public spectacles, fairs, and community gatherings. Very few could identify the ecological markers historically linked to the deity—such as particular groves of Sal trees, riverbanks of the Ajay River, or termite mounds used in ritual clay collection. This cognitive shift indicates that ritual knowledge is increasingly detached from environmental literacy. In earlier generations, the sacred grove or water source was remembered not simply as a site of worship but as a protected ecological zone. Among the younger cohort, however, the deity is more often perceived as a cultural emblem rather than a guardian of the landscape.

The perspectives of the nine Panchayat members interviewed reveal the institutional dimension of this transformation. Local governing bodies frequently view festivals such as Gajan and Rash as instruments of rural development, tourism promotion, and cultural branding. Funding for temple construction, lighting installations, and festival infrastructure is often justified as a means of boosting local visibility and attracting visitors. While these initiatives strengthen communal participation and economic activity, they also contribute to what may be described as the administrative re-framing of the sacred. In this framework, the deity functions less as an ecological agent and more as a symbolic asset within the cultural economy of the village. The sacred grove, once maintained through ritual taboo, becomes expendable once the deity is relocated to a built structure supported by institutional patronage.

Taken together, the fieldwork suggests that Rarh Bengal is experiencing a gradual “desiccation” of the sacred landscape. Ritual continues to animate village life, yet its ecological foundation is steadily eroding under the pressures of agricultural modernization, industrial extraction, and cultural institutionalization. The resulting condition is not the disappearance of folk religion but its semiotic transformation—from an indexical system embedded in landscape to a symbolic system maintained through heritage discourse. In this sense, the “Eco-Semiotic Gap” identified in the fieldwork represents not merely a ritual shift but a profound alteration in the relationship between culture, ecology, and memory within the lateritic frontier of Rarh Bengal.

### **Data Triangulation: The Material Displacement**

The following table summarizes the divergence between the theological "Ideal" and the observed "Reality" documented across the 45 interviews and site visits:

Category	Ritual Ideal (The "Signified")	Modern Reality (The "Signifier")	Observed Impact
Water	Ritual bath in the River Ajay/Damodar (Living Flow)	Bathing in a concrete tub/borewell (Stagnant Utility)	Loss of hydrological sanctity; ritual becomes "symbolic hygiene."
Earth	Sacred clay from the <i>Bamani</i> (Ant-hill) or riverbank	Commercially bought clay, plaster of Paris, or cement	Decoupling of the deity from the geological "Rarh" identity.
Forest	Worship in the <i>Garam Than</i> (Natural Sacred Grove)	Worship in a concrete/tiled temple structure	Transformation of an "Open-Air" spirit into a "housed" Brahmanical idol.
Flora	Use of <i>Bel</i> leaves, <i>Akanda</i> , and wild forest blooms	Market-bought marigolds and plastic garlands	Erosion of local ethno-botanical knowledge.

The shifting religio-cultural landscape of Rarh Bengal can be productively understood within a broader historical ecology of eastern Indian frontier regions, where the relationship between folk religion and landscape has historically structured patterns of settlement, survival, and cultural memory. The present study examines the eco-semiotic evolution of folk deities such as Dharmaraj, Manasa, and the Garam spirits, arguing that contemporary transformations reveal a process of "Displaced Indexicality", in which ritual symbols become detached from their ecological referents. Traditional scholarship on Bengali folk cults has largely framed these traditions through the paradigm of Sanskritization or through philological analysis of texts such as the Mangalkavyas. However, this approach often overlooks the material and ecological grounding of vernacular religiosity, especially in regions like Rarh where the sacred historically

emerged from a specific lateritic landscape. A parallel insight can be drawn from studies of the Sundarbans, where the relationship between environment and belief structures has long shaped social imagination. As Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar notes, the folklore of the Sundarbans reveals a worldview defined by “man’s perpetual struggle with the wild animals, especially the tiger,” and in this context the presence of tiger gods and other protective spirits reflects “a more primordial existence” rooted in the precarious ecology of the region (Sarkar 2–3). Such observations reinforce the argument that folk deities historically functioned as ecological signifiers embedded within specific landscapes. In Rarh Bengal, this eco-semiotic relationship manifested through ritual practices tied to sacred clay, forest groves, riverine hydrology, and agricultural cycles, all of which acted as indexical signs linking the deity to the land. Drawing upon a stratified fieldwork sample of forty-five respondents across nine villages in Burdwan, Bankura, and Birbhum, this research triangulates oral narratives, ritual practices, and material observation to compare “Ritual Ideals” (the Signified) with “Modern Realities” (the Signifier). The findings reveal a clear shift in which sacred materials such as ant-hill clay, river silt, and forest offerings are increasingly replaced by concrete platforms, borewell water, and commercially sourced ritual goods. In semiotic terms, the deity that once functioned as an index of the local ecosystem is gradually transformed into an abstract symbol detached from the landscape. This transformation mirrors broader historical processes observed in the Sundarbans, where colonial land reclamation, deforestation, and infrastructural expansion fundamentally altered the socio-ecological system. Sarkar observes that as forests receded and settlements expanded under colonial development projects, “the mythical atmosphere linked to the wilderness and the fear of the unknown” gradually diminished (Sarkar 4). The erosion of ecological uncertainty consequently altered the cultural imagination that had once sustained a vibrant pantheon of protective spirits. A similar dynamic is visible in contemporary Rarh Bengal, where industrialization, stone quarrying, and agricultural modernization are reshaping

the relationship between community and landscape. Within this context, the study argues that the increasing “museumification” of folk traditions by state agencies and local political institutions represents not merely a shift in ritual aesthetics but a deeper ontological transformation. Open-air Than shrines—historically embedded within groves, termite mounds, or riverbanks—are being replaced by Brahmanical-style concrete temples, thereby removing the deity from its ecological habitat. While such institutionalization enhances the visibility and prestige of the cult, it simultaneously strips the deity of its functional role as a guardian of environmental commons. The deity becomes a cultural emblem maintained for social cohesion, heritage tourism, or political patronage rather than an active mediator between community and landscape. From the perspective of Vernacular Environmentalism, this transformation represents a significant loss. Folk rituals once operated as informal ecological management systems that protected groves, water sources, and biodiversity through religious taboo.

When these rituals are relocated into built temples detached from their natural surroundings, the protective ecological function of the sacred collapses. The transition from sacred landscape to cultural monument therefore signals what may be termed the “calcification” of the sacred, where ritual survives but its ecological vitality disappears. By situating these findings within the framework of Environmental Humanities, the present study argues that the folk deities of Rarh should be understood not as relics of a pre-modern past but as agents of vernacular ecological consciousness and subaltern resistance. Their displacement from the landscape reflects the broader homogenizing pressures of modern development and globalized religious nationalism, both of which privilege standardized temple worship over localized ecological spirituality. Recognizing the eco-semiotic role of these deities thus becomes essential not only for understanding the cultural history of Rarh Bengal but also for reimagining the relationship between religion, ecology, and community in the Anthropocene.

### **The Museumified Deity**

Interviews with the *Gajan Samiti* and archaeological liaisons confirm a trend toward "Museumification." As the physical environment of Rarh is scarred by stone quarrying and sand mining, the deities are "rescued" into concrete temples funded by local political bodies. This fieldwork suggests that while the *tradition* of folk worship remains vibrant, its eco-semiotic core is being hollowed out. The deity is no longer a guardian of the landscape but a cultural artifact maintained for social cohesion and political visibility. The transition from the empirical findings of the Rarh Bengal fieldwork to a theoretical "Discussion" requires an engagement with Vernacular Environmentalism. This framework, as articulated by scholars like Ramachandra Guha and Joan Martinez-Alier, posits that environmental consciousness in the Global South is often not a formal "green" movement but is embedded within the daily, lived experience of the sacred and the subaltern. In Rarh, the folk deity acts as the semiotic anchor for this localized ecology.

### **The Deity as Ecological "Sign-Vehicle"**

The data suggests that the folk deities of Rarh—specifically Dharmaraj and the Garam spirits—functioned historically as "ecological sign-vehicles." According to the eco-semiotic theories of Peeter Puura and Kalevi Kull, a landscape is "read" through its cultural markers. When the 45 interviewees described the *Than* (sacred grove), they were not merely describing a place of worship but a micro-biome protected by religious taboo. As Amita Baviskar notes in her work on indigenous ecologies, the "sacred" often serves as a vernacular strategy for resource management (Baviskar 102). In Rarh, the "Ritual Ideal" of using ant-hill clay or river-silt (the *Signified*) was a mechanism that forced the community to maintain the health of those specific geographical features.

### **The Crisis of "Displaced Indexicality"**

The shift from the "Ritual Ideal" to the "Modern Reality" (the use of concrete, borewells, and market-bought flora) represents what can be termed "Displaced Indexicality." In semiotics, an indexical sign is one that has a direct physical connection to its object—like smoke to fire. The folk deity was traditionally an index of the Rarh landscape. However, the "Museumification" observed in the *Gajan Samiti* and Panchayat interviews indicates that the deity is being transformed into a Symbol—a sign that is arbitrary and detached from its physical environment.

As Jawhar Sircar argues, the "construction of Hindu identity" in this region involved the absorption of these fierce, land-bound spirits into a more sterilized, Brahmanical framework (Sircar 42). The fieldwork confirms that this process is now accelerated by industrialization. When a *Dharmaraj* stone is housed in a tiled, concrete temple, the Vernacular Environmentalism that once protected the surrounding grove is rendered obsolete. The deity no longer "needs" the forest to exist; therefore, the forest loses its sacred protection. The present article must conclude that the erosion of these rituals is not merely a loss of "culture" but a loss of environmental resilience. The 15 school children's perception of the deity as "heritage" rather than "habitat" reflects a pedagogical gap where the Rarh's unique lateritic ecology is being forgotten. To reclaim the eco-semiotic link, the scholarship must move beyond viewing folk deities as "folkloric relics" and recognize them as the "last stand" of vernacular environmentalism against the homogenizing forces of the Anthropocene. As Ralph Nicholas suggests, the "confluence of nature and culture" is the only sustainable way to view Bengal's sacred landscape (Nicholas 88).

## The Calcified Sacred

The religiocultural tradition of Rarh Bengal stands at a critical juncture where the "Red Soil" (*Lal Mati*) is no longer merely a substrate for the sacred but a commodity under siege. This research has demonstrated that the folk deities of the region—once the living embodiments of a specific lateritic ecology—are undergoing a process of semiotic thinning. Through the analysis of fieldwork conducted with farmers, priests, and school children, it is evident that the indexical link between the deity and the landscape is being severed in favor of a "Symbolic" heritage that serves political and social cohesion rather than ecological preservation.

The data triangulation presented in this study highlights a disturbing trend toward "The Calcified Sacred." As documented in the villages of Bankura and Birbhum, the transition from the *Garam Than* (the sacred grove) to tiled, concrete structures represents a move from Vernacular Environmentalism to Institutionalized Religion. In the former, the deity's potency was intrinsically tied to the health of the ant-hill, the flow of the Ajay River, and the preservation of the Sal forest. In the latter, the deity is "housed" and "sanitized," effectively ending its role as a guardian of the commons.

Furthermore, the lack of eco-semiotic awareness among the younger generation (Class VIII–XII) suggests that the "memory of the land" is not being transmitted through ritual as it once was. For the youth, Dharmaraj or Bhadu are becoming "Cultural Exhibits"—artifacts of a past rurality rather than active forces in their contemporary environmental reality. This "Museumification," supported by local Gajan Samitis and Panchayat councils, prioritizes the visual spectacle of the ritual over its ecological function.

Ultimately, this paper argues that to understand the folk deities of Rarh is to understand the resistance of the marginal. If these deities are stripped of their ecological markers—their *Lal Mati*, their sacred water, and their forest shrines—they cease to be the "Autochthonous Gods" of the frontier. They instead become pale imitations of the Puranic pantheon. Future scholarship

must, therefore, prioritize the Ethno-Ecological dimension of these cults. Only by recognizing the folk deity as a site of vernacular environmental resistance can we hope to preserve the unique ontological density of Rarh Bengal in an increasingly homogenized world.

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