CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

I

A study of interrelationship between food and rituals performed during various worships, festivals and ceremonies in certain rural areas in West Bengal with ecological variations was undertaken for this study to find out the influence of food offered during the rituals and also food habit of the people in contemporary society, in selected villages in each of the districts of Purulia, Midnapur and 24-Parganas. It is all the time considered that ecology moulds the culture to some extent till new technology and science overcome it.

Our society is composed of divergent groups of religious communities of Hindus, Muslims, Christians including the animistic Tribals of identifiable cultures. It is, therefore, a stupendous task for one to take up such intricate study of some people distributed at different eco-zones and as such only, the Hindu community was singled out and the study was limited to six villages only, as stated above.

As a first step of the study, it was necessary to ascertain the geography and ecological conditions influencing food production and ethnic structure with their respective culture and the rites and rituals performed during worships
of various gods and goddesses and festivals in individual homes and temples in these three districts by a comparison with the available reference books and journals recognised as authoritative. This was done as far as practicable. Thereafter, field studies were undertaken by visiting the six villages, in turn, to collect data relating to the setting, population, family pattern, caste structure, literacy level, working force influencing the local economy in the shape of food production and cash income, worships and festivals performed with the prescribed rites and rituals, life cycle ceremonies and bratas etc.

In phased manner each of the six villages - Keshargarh, and Golkunra of Purulia district, Mymensingh Colony and Thakur Nagar of Midnapur district and Dihi Medammalla and Pathankhali of 24-Parganas district were visited. In view of ecological variations, the villages were grouped into three Eco-zones. Eco-zone I included the villages Keshargarh, Golkunra and Mymensingh Colony, Eco-zone II, Thakurnagar and Dihi Medanmalla and Eco-zone III Pathankhali.

The field study was completed and relevant materials and data were collected both by observation and interview. After analysis and comparison of the collected data with the first hand knowledge gathered from Census Reports, reference books and journals, the conclusion of the study is now being drawn.
The six villages studied are situated in different regions of the State and so they have different ecology. Due to specific ecological condition, it was found that each eco-zone as named above, has variations in the nature of food-production, culture, ethnic structure and religious performances like worship of deities and observance of bratas.

The contemporary rural society here has an added advantage over what it gets from the natural environment, especially with regard food production. It has irrigational facilities in the shape of shallow and deep tubewells, where there is electricity, fertilizers and supply of high-breed seeds. It has also the facility of modern education in as much as there are schools and colleges, roads and transport facilities and, last but not the least, mass communication through radio and newspapers. In consequence, the behavioral and cultural patterns have a changed outlook. Even the dietary has some added items, viz., powdered milk where milk is scarce, and wheat to make up the deficit of rice. Tea and packed food stuffs have also been inducted in the rural areas. Now, music is played through record-players and mikes during the festivals and ceremonies, as in towns, replacing the traditional types and showing the trend of modernisation.
Eco-zone I being located in the west region of the State has the characteristics of the western plateau fringe region of Chhotanagpur. Its climate is dry with scanty of rainfall. The soil is rocky and laterite. The fields around the villages are undulating and have small jungles here and there. The villages in this zone can produce rice with much difficulty, as rainfall is scanty and the paddy fields are uneven and not suited for storage of water. The winter crops are wheat and pulses which require less water. Vegetables grown are mainly watered by the village wells and the ring wells attached to households as also by ponds which are both poor in quality and quantity. The soil condition does not permit production of coconut and banana here. For scarcity of cow and buffalo, milk is in short supply, and skilled confectioners for preparation of sweet meats are rarely available. The only by-product from the milk is chhana. Moreover, the area having the cultural background of Bihar, the villagers are not habituated to take channa-made sweets. Fish is available in a limited quantity in these villages. The only source of supply is the few big tanks, the place having no rivers and creeks nearby. The villages being close proximity to Purulia town, the villagers meet the deficit in their food requirements by purchasing the food stuff from the town market as well as from markets of the neighbouring villages. The third village, Mymensingh Colony, is a settled colony mainly consisting of the families of service-holders and business men. It has, therefore, no agricultural base, besides some kitchen
gardens. Being situated in the non-Municipal area of Jhargram town, the colony people go to the town market to buy their food requirements.

Eco-zone II comprises two villages - Thakurnagar of Midnapur and Dihi Medanmalla of 24-Parganas districts. Not being far from the Bay of Bengal, the village Thakurnagar situated as it is in the south of the district, has a fairly heavy monsoon and it rarely faces drought. The climate is warm and humid and the soil is of 'enthel type' and to some extent saline. It has large paddy fields and almost every household has a pond and some raised lands attached or adjacent to the homestead. There is a tidal canal passing by the village. There is also a good road transport system connecting Mechada Railway Station in the north with Contai town in the south. It passes through the village. The people are mostly cultivators, and they produce sufficient rice to meet their yearly food requirement. In case of crop failure, which is not total on any occasion, wheat is purchased to make up the deficit. The vegetable gardens produce sufficient quantity of various vegetables including potato, roots and tubers. Some families produce these on commercial basis, and sell the surplus to procure other domestic necessities. The other village, Dihi Medanmalla, is in the south-west of 24-Parganas district and is adjacent to Baruipur Municipality. It is connected with road and rail communications with Calcutta. This has, therefore, an added facility over the other two villages mentioned. Situated in a favourable
climatic condition and on a rich belt of land of sandy loam variety, the village has many orchards, growing good quality mango, lichi, guava, pine-apples and jack-fruit. Vegetables are grown in profuse quantity and of different varieties, not only to meet the daily requirements of the village, but also to sell in Calcutta in order to meet a part of the requirement of the people. The Brahmans compose the bulk of the population who earn their livelihood mostly by service and selling the fruits of the gardens. They have agricultural land in small holdings which they get cultivated by day labourers available in the locality, but the production is not enough to meet their requirements for the whole year. They purchase rice and wheat from market whenever required. Fish is a common item of daily menu as it can be had in plenty from the local tanks and markets.

The long village of Eco-zone III is Pathankhali. This is situated on the reclaimed lands of the Sundarbans. The settlement here is about hundred years old and is mostly inhabited by cultivators and fishermen families, who earn their living through agriculture and fishing in the tidal canals, creeks, natural rivers and the adjoining sea. The habitation is quite suited to the ecological condition of the region. They produce rice, pulses, green chilies and melons in sufficient quantities and grow coconut in the saline soil. There are a little patched of banana plants here and there. Date and palm trees grow here aplenty. These are used for production of a good quality of molasses.
The Bengalees are predominantly rice-eating people. All but the very devout Hindus, specially Vaishnavas and high caste widows, eat fish as a principal item of their food. Those who can afford to enjoy sweetmeats get them prepared with milk casein and sugar. Another essential item is pulses which supplement the proteins requirements. A large assortment of vegetables and seasonal fruits form their dietary chart. Recurrent shortage of rice due to natural causes like drought, flood, salinity, etc. has compelled the villagers to use more wheat products. As the Bengalees prefer tea to other beverages, the habit of taking tea has gained currency in the remote villages now. The habit of chewing of betel leaf with lime, arecanut and tobacco is commonly found among the villagers of these villages. Most of the men are found to smoke bidi and cigarette. The people of these villages get almost all the items of their dietary chart from the local production and purchase other essential items from the local shops and markets. Though the rural people are more or less aware of the nutritional value of food and balanced diet as a result of frequent publicity and propaganda by the Block Development Offices and audio visual programmes over the radio and T.V. they hardly afford to take such food on account of general penury. Their food habits have cultural linkage and heritage too for which they rarely change them. Moreover, the cooking is so contrived that it only adds to taste with plenty of chillies and spices and over-boiling, which spoils the natural vitamin contents of such food.
Though pulses contain sufficient protein, all families cannot take these, as these are produced in small quantities in these villages and have to be purchased at quite a high price. Nowadays poultry are reared in these villages and eggs are taken when fish is not available. Meat is sparingly consumed and that too occasionally due to its high cost. There are also certain food taboos. Some varieties of pulses are not taken on certain days of the month. Similarly, there is restriction with regard to meat. Only goat-meat is usually taken and in certain regions, like Eco-zone I, where sacrifices of poultry are in vogue during the worship of some deities, the flesh of such birds are also taken by the people. Almost in all villages the womenfolk, specially the elderly ones, do not take meat and eggs, specially among the high castes. The lower castes do not have any restrictions with regard to food items, excepting their 'totems'. There are also certain rituals connected with cooking specially during the festivals and worships. The womenfolk keep the kitchen and utensils clean, which are washed before cooking. The custom of women eating after the males have taken their food is still followed in the villages. The caste rules of taking cooked food in the houses of other castes, or eating together during feasts and invitation at home are respected, specially in the case of Brahmans.
Food and ecology are closely inter-related. Ecology influences the food habit of the people. The types of food as are easily available in a particular area are generally offered in worships and rituals to the deities also. It is a process of balancing the mode of living of a community with natural environments, in course of which rites, rituals and other cultural activities and festivals are shaped accordingly. Food continues to play an important role in the religious life, and is associated with many of the religious rituals. The practice of giving food or abstaining from food has provided man in this every day life with a symbolic way to indicate his devotion, love and respect to the supernatural powers. It is customary to offer the favourite foods to the deities during various worships.

Again, different eco-zones influence the people comprising various ethnic groups with specific religious belief - systems and traditions, according to which they observe the rites and rituals in different ways. The people living in Keshargarh, in eco-zone I in Purulia district, are mostly Hinduised Tribals with forests around their habitat. They worship godlings as Kundra, Sanyasi Raja, Baghut, Baram and hold Tusu-festival. The inhabitants of Pathankhali, in eco-zone III, have their deities like Banabibi, Dakshin Roy, and appease them for fear of wild animals.
Common worships in all the eco-zones are related to the worship of 'Devi' in all her forms of Durga, Kali and Jagatadhatri. Besides, Lakshmi, Saraswati and Siva and the village deities of Sitala, Chandi, Manasa are also worshipped. They observe all the festivals connected with harvesting and life-cycle ceremonies. The womenfolk observe most of the bratas in vogue. The high caste women perform the bratas with all the rituals and with much austerity. The foodstuffs and fruits available in the eco-zones form the main ingredients of food offerings to the deities worshipped and in festivals and feasts and also in performance of bratas. In the festivals connected with the celebration of agricultural operations, - like cattle worship, harvesting and arrival of new crops, - plants, grass and flowers available locally are used. The articles required as per Sastric rules and traditions, if not available locally, are purchased from markets to observe the rites and rituals.

Vegetable food offerings are given to the deities in all the major worships, but it is different in the villages of Purulia. They offer sacrifice of birds, i.e., pigeons, ducks, fowl. Brahman priests are always engaged for such worships and other ceremonies, like Annarprasana i.e., first rice feeding ceremony, marriage, sradh and the services of barbers are essential in case of high caste people during these ceremonies. But the low caste people who are not entitled, as per caste rules, to the services of Brahman priests perform the worships and other rites by the priest of their own caste or a person mainly by
the head of family, or a Brahman of lowest order. Whatever
may be the cultural background or caste rules and religious
belief-systems, there are certain particular traditions
and rituals pertaining to each caste group, which are
revered and are repeated in the observance of each and
every ceremony. The variations are therefore due to the
culture conditioned by the local ecology and economy, the
economy of the villages being dependent upon the income
from the food and allied productions which, in turn, depend
on the ecology.

During the field-study conducted in the six villages,
including two semi-urban areas, viz. Mymenshingh Colony and
Dhili Medanmalla enumeration of literacy, services and jobs
pursued by the villagers, migration, availability of modern
amenities like electricity, communication and educational
institutions have been done. It has been found that
modernism and urban culture have entered into the rural
areas. In spite of all this, the rural folks still stick to
the traditional observance of bratas, festivals and worships
of gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon with the
prescribed rites and rituals, with the sacred items of
offerings in vogue, from time immemorial. In certain areas
the items are found to vary because of paucity, which has
ultimately become their tradition. However, certain particular
socio-religious cult has led to adoption of varieties. For
example, sacrifice of fowls, pigeons or animals before a
god or a goddess in some cases. In Purulia, sacrifices of
birds and animals are made before Lord Shiva, Manasa and
so on, as detailed in the foregoing discussion, which are
unthinkable and not done in other regions.
Whatever variations there might be, there are common traits everywhere as the rituals must be held on certain auspicious days, priests must perform these rituals and a minimum standard of offerings must be made strictly according to the traditional manner. It may be stated with emphasis that the Sastric rules, caste and family tradition, belief system, local custom, culture and above all ecological influence lie behind the regular continuance of the usual rites and rituals by the Hindu community and thus a social solidarity is maintained by these.

Besides various worships, festivals and bratas, there are many life-cycle ceremonies, the performance of which are obligatory to every member of the society. There are some prescribed rites to perform, rituals to observe, allied formalities of giving presentations to the presiding priest or Brahmans and relatives, and even to members of the family. If anybody fails to perform the life-cycle ceremonies at least on the minimum standard, he incurs displeasure of the community and even may be made outcaste by the society. It is in this sphere that the caste hierarchy, caste distinction and distances are prominently noticeable. There are Sastric rules, communal traditions and caste rules which have to be strictly obeyed. An individual may acquire modern style of life due to his education or by coming in contact with urban life and society and he may advocate removal of caste system due to a particular bias - even so, he can not but participate, observe and follow all the rites and rituals connected with life-cycle ceremonies.
Bratas are mainly folk-beliefs and traditions observed by the women and girls, for ages throughout West Bengal and other parts of India. So the aged ones generally observe these to get a child, to get fortune, for recovery from a disease and for welfare of their families. Some are observed entirely for dedication to a deity, and to earn his or her blessings for piety and salvation. The girls mainly observe these to get a handsome, qualified and wealthy husband, to live a happy life. The men who observe these, mainly do so, for recovery from a disease, to win a law-suit or to have wealth and relief from misfortune. Certain taboos are observed during these bratas.

The most common and popular worships are the propitiation of Manasa, Sitala, Satyanarayan, Sasthi and ceremonial fasts of Astami (8th lunar day), Ekadasi (11th day of the dark and bright phase of the moon), and Purnima days (fullmoon days), and to observe Sivaratri and Pausaparban, i.e., last day of Pausa (January-February).

The items of offering of food-articles to these deities are based, more or less, on the tradition and religious edicts. But some regional variations are observed according to the availability of such articles, due to physical and ecological conditions, which restrict their production very much, in certain areas.
While the bratas are conducted by the priests, the minor bratas in which such worship is not required, are performed by the women or the head of the family himself. There are some bratas relating to cultivation and cattle preservation. Some others are observed for general welfare of the village.

These bratas are spread over every month, according to certain auspicious days, throughout the year and provide a spirit of revival among the people tied by the common chores of life, as well as forge social solidarity. These also enhance and retain the cultural standards also. In a way, it is the living force of life of the village people.

VI

From this it will be evident that there is a close link between ecology, food-production and food-habit, availability of food-articles, and observance of bratas, worships and rituals in the rural society of West Bengal. Even many new items of food or recently grown fruits are not offered to the deity, except the traditional ones.

The contemporary society has changed from the traditional one after Independence, due to partition and migration and also for political and economic reasons. Many changes have occurred as a result of Development Plans, extension of transport and communication facilities to villages and spread of modern education. Yet, there has not been any appreciable change in the incorporation of
particular food item to the food offerings made in worships and festivals though changes are noticeable in day-to-day intake of the food. The Sastric rules, traditions, belief in supernaturals and magic still dominate in all ceremonial activities and there are little variations from what were in vogue in the traditional society.