

ETHNICITY AND RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM: CELEBRATING DURG PŪJĀ IN THE SUNDARBANS OF INDIA

ANGELICA MARINESCU*

The present research approaches the social aspect of the relationship between identity construction and social solidarity. I envisage the way the two major ethnic and religious communities (Hindus and Muslims) in the Indian Gangetic Delta share religious beliefs and everyday life. My research is an exploration in the academic literature about the Sundarbans region, the ritual of Durg PŪJĀ and it is based on participative observation during the Festival of Durg PŪJĀ in West Bengal, India. The perspective of research is that proposed by Atashee Chatterjee Sinha, starting from Durkheim's view on solidarity and social connection, stressing that religious phenomena are 'communal rather than individual' (Sinha 2009, 81-101). From an anthropological perspective, 'the religious and the sociopolitical have always been inextricably connected, since it is our view that religion both expresses and organizes forms of sociality, regimes of power, historical struggles, and modes of production' (Isabelle Clark-Decès 2011, 1954). Rituals are total social phenomena that activate the deeper levels (Gurvitch 1963), constituting a privileged approach to reconstitute social logics, group identities and understanding the political, economical, social, symbolical issues, to understand the relationship between the individual and the collective, the profane and the sacred.

Key words: religious syncretism, ethnicity, policy, social solidarity.

INTRODUCTION

This article is the result of a (pre)field research conducted in Sundarbans (the Indian Gangetic Delta), West Bengal, India in the period from 9 to 29 October 2013, during the time of Durg PŪJĀ, one of the most popular religious festivals in India, by its community participation, ritual complexity and visual splendor (Rodrigues [1953] 2003, 2). It is considered the most important yearly festival in West Bengal, beginning on the sixth day of *Navarātra* (the nine-night festival) and continuing for five days (from 9 to 14 October in 2013). I chose Sundarbans because it was a region where I knew an Indian family who was willing to host me. During the participation in the ritual in a village called Basanti, one villager

* Associate lecturer at Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, University of Bucharest. Correspondence address: Institute of Sociology – Romanian Academy, Casa Academiei, Calea 13 Septembrie 13, 4th floor, sector 5, Bucharest, Romania. E-mail: angelica.marinescu@yahoo.ro.