

The Shy Coconut Palm: A Cross-Cultural Understanding of its Imprint on the Ecocultural Landscapes of Bengal and Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Cocos nucifera L. (Arecaceae), the coconut palm, is a cultural icon of the moist tropics where these trees epitomize the coastal vegetation. Although the fruit is naturally adapted for dispersal by sea currents, its pantropical dissemination and inland colonization was achieved only with human help. Today, about 11 million farmers in almost 90 countries depend on this plantation crop for their livelihoods. With significant economic value, practically every part of this palm is useful to humans, and this has sustained numerous traditional communities for millennia. In addition to this practical significance, the coconut has also penetrated into the lingual, cultural, social, and spiritual matrix of traditional communities across the globe. Strategically poised in the extreme east of the Indian subcontinent, the Bengal region has had ancient land connections with Southeast Asia through the northeast, as well as early sea links across the Bay of Bengal which still remains even today a *mare incognitum*. Bengal not only acted as an intermediary in trade and commerce, but also played an important role in the cultural exchanges with Southeast Asia. This humble fruit is a source of sustenance, as well as a symbol of identity, holding a special place in the cultures of both Bengal and Southeast Asia. This study endeavours to trace the mark left by the coconut palm on the ecocultural landscapes around the Bay of Bengal through the biocultural approach, and explore its cross-cultural significance by encompassing the historical, social, and scientific dimensions.

Kew Words: *Bengal, Biocultural Heritage, Ecocultural Landscapes, Coconut, Southeast Asia.*

Introduction

In the timelessness of plant-human relationship, the presence of a plant as a tangible natural being can often eclipse its existence as an intangible social construct. In biomes where the coconut is a cultural icon, thick strands of this elegant palm embody the exotic vistas of seashore vegetation that endlessly stretch along the moist tropical coastlines. *The tree's* gift of copious bunches of quaint fruits, each

with a nut—the coconut *per se*, is portrayed by Robin Laurance in his acclaimed botanical work as down-to-earth, albeit no non-human species can claim to play so many and so diverse roles in the story of humans (Laurance, 2019: 1). The coir-cushioned fruits are naturally designed to survive the perilous fall to the ground, remain afloat and can drift with sea currents (Beveridge *et al.*, 2022: 6). However, human espousal allowed the coconut to spread beyond coral atolls to establish its pantropical presence in the humid tropical belt 23° north and 23° south of the equator, extending from the seashores to the lower mountains (600 m) (Harries and Clement, 2014: 565). Today, it is one of the most widespread fruit-yielding crops on Earth (Ward and Brookfield, 1992: 467). This long-drawn interaction between humans and coconuts stretches back to time immemorial, and has strongly moulded the geographical and genetic range of this species. Furthermore, these amphibious invaders can colonize inland habitats only with anthropogenic aid, and have adapted themselves to diverse terrains that range from beaches to foothills (Adkins *et al.*, 2011: 8). The extent of natural diffusion and centre of origin of this crop is still a matter of fierce debates (Maloney, 1993: 355). From the palaeotropics, the crop had initially spread east, and then west, reaching the neotropics during pre-Columbian and post-Columbian periods respectively (Gunn *et al.*, 2014: 1). From its home in Island Southeast Asia, cultivated coconuts travelled far across the globe during the Neolithic with seafaring Austronesians, in the east across the Pacific Ocean, and in the west across the Indian Ocean, with the fruit playing a critical role in these prehistoric migrations as a portable source of food and drink during long sea voyages at least 4,500 years-ago (Baudouin and Lebrun, 2009: 467). Later, a distinct population of domesticated coconut developed in South India and this reached Africa ca. 3,000 years-ago, and finally Europeans colonists introduced them to the Americas ca. 500 years ago (Sauer, 1971: 309). Today, nearly 12 million farmers in nearly 90 countries depend on this pantropical crop for their livelihoods (Samosir *et al.*, 2006: 36). Practically every part of this tree is useful, with both culinary and non-culinary practices sustaining traditional communities for millennia, and also with future prospects of immense economic value (Henrietta *et al.*, 2022: 258). However, the coconut has also penetrated into the lingual, cultural, social, and spiritual matrix of local people, and quite pertinently exemplify the their traditional concepts of sustainability (Ahuja *et al.*, 2014: 237). Strategically poised in the extreme east of the Indian subcontinent, undivided Bengal had not only ancient land connections with Southeast Asia through the northeast, but also had early sea links across the Bay of Bengal which still remains a *mare incognitum* (Gupta, 2005: 22). Bengal, as an intermediary in trade and commerce, played a key role in cultural exchanges with Southeast Asia. This humble fruit as a source

of sustenance and a symbol of identity holds a special place in the cultures of both Bengal and Southeast Asia. The objective of this paper is to explore the indelible imprint of the coconut on the ecocultural landscapes of Bengal and Southeast Asia through the biocultural approach, and explore its multilayered cross-cultural significance in this region with the historical, social, and scientific facets to delve into the hitherto unexplored role of this more-than-human actor in our everyday existence.

The Coconut Tree: *Cocos nucifera* L. (Arecaceae)

Botanically known as *Cocos nucifera* L. and belonging to the palm family (Arecaceae), the coconut tree was named by Carl Linnaeus in 1753 in his *Species Plantarum* ('The Species of Plants' in Latin), the iconic book that enlisted every plant species known to Europeans at that time (Linnaeus, 1753: 1188). The generic name (and the prefix of its English name) is the Latinized sixteen century Portuguese word *coco* ('head' or 'skull'), as Spanish and Portuguese explorers first encountering Pacific islanders in 1521, and their coconut shells with face-like triple indents reminiscent of a malevolent character in Iberian folklore called Coco or Coca. The specific epithet is derived from two Latin words: *nux* ('nut') and *fera* ('bearing'). This term 'coconut' can refer to the tree, or its fruit or seed. The tall habit is up to 30 m high, with unbranched, slender stem forming a column-like trunk ending in a crown of large, feather-like compound leaves. A mass of fibrous roots anchor the trunk to the sandy soil. Minute male and female flowers are borne on branched spikes covered by a large boat-like spathe. The one-seeded fibrous fruit is technically a fibrous drupe, not a nut (Beveridge *et al.*, 2022: 5). The epicarp is a glossy skin, green to brown in colour. The mesocarp is a fibrous coir forming the husk along with the exocarp. The endocarp is a hard shell with three pores, two plugged (the 'eyes'), and one functional. Immature fruits are the green coconuts, mature ones are the brown coconuts. The single seed inside has a thin seed coat enclosing a liquid endosperm (coconut 'water') that eventually turns into a solid endosperm (coconut 'meat'), and a small embryo under the pore. The extracted fibre is called coir. The dried flesh is called copra. This tall, slender palm with crown of leaves bearing bunches of fruits, is not only a beautiful but also an useful tree. The coconut tree perhaps yields more useful products for humans than any other tree as the source of food, fodder, beverage, medicine, cosmetics, fibre, fuel, timber, and raw material for making a surfeit of goods in autochthonous material culture (Ahuja *et al.*, 2014: 229). This plantation crop provides food security, supports traditional livelihoods, and contributes to the gross domestic product (GDP) of several Asia-Pacific countries as an important source of both edible and non-edible products (Henrietta *et al.*, 2022: 259). The copra is dried, ground

and pressed for edible oil. The coir is spun into cordage, or used for packaging, bedding and flooring. Although the coconut finds its greatest visibility in its commercial applications in the industrialized West, however in its native range across the ecocultural landscapes of the Asia-Pacific region it remains profoundly entrenched in the autochthonous cultures and invisible to the world outside. Therefore, it is no wonder that this reticent palm tree which is revered by the locals, has earned eloquent sobriquets such as the ‘Consols of the East’, ‘Tree of Life’, ‘Tree of Abundance’, ‘Tree of Heaven’, ‘Tree of Plenty’, to name only a few. “If you could count the stars, then you could count all the ways the coconut tree serves us” is a familiar proverb from the Philippines. Indonesians claim that coconuts have as many uses as there are days on the calendar. In India, it has been, among many things, imagined as the *Kalpavriksha* (‘The Wish-fulfilling Tree’ in Sanskrit) of classical mythology. India, Indonesia, and the Philippines are the world leader in coconut production (Parmar *et al.*, 2021: 164). World Coconut Day is celebrated on the second September, since 2009, by the stakeholders in the coconut farming business to mark the formation of Asian-Pacific Coconut Community (APCC), with the objective of raising awareness about the importance of these shy fruits and recognize their multifarious contributions to the richness of human life.

Bengal and the India-Southeast Asia Trade and Cultural Contacts

Due to its vantage point at the extreme east of the subcontinent, the Bengal region has been a transit point between South and Southeast Asia with fertile Gangetic delta poised between the remote Tibetan plateau and the turbulent Indian Ocean, functioning as a land bridge and a port of call in the ancient socioeconomic exchange between the Indic world and Indosphere (Akhtar and Khondaker, 2021: 21). Thus, unlike other regions of India’s eastern coast, the Bengal-Southeast Asia contacts of remote antiquity involved both land connections through India’s Northeast, and sea links across the Bay of Bengal (Bellina 2002: 329). The maritime past was part of the network of pan-Indian and pan-Asian contacts centred around the Bay of Bengal is Interaction Sphere (BBIS)—the littoral zones and hinterlands in South Asia, viz. Bangladesh, India (Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, West Bengal, Assam), Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia, viz. Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia (Gupta, 2005: 23). The overland and overseas routes linking South and Southeast Asia were at times complementary and at other times competitive. The ancient littoral polities of Southeast Asia were well-connected to India’s eastern seaboard and Sri Lanka through a wide range of maritime trade networks across the Bay of Bengal on account of favourable monsoon winds. In addition to commerce, religious contacts,

particularly Brahminical and Buddhist, inspired a deep cultural dialogue that continues to this day (Dhar, 2023: 13). One of the earliest contacts noted were probably of Buddhist monks sent by Emperor Asoka to Myanmar in the 3rd century BCE. More evidence of connections between India and Southeast Asia were found in later years. The Buddhist *Jataka* tales of yore narrate many sea voyages undertaken to the land of gold, spices and coconuts (Coedès, 1975: 17). Bengal, the headstone of this Bay of Bengal arc, was a mediator in commercial activities, and played a key role in cultural interchange with the littoral trading posts of Southeast Asia. A couple of fifth century votive inscriptions from Malaysia records the gift of the skilled mariner Mahanavika Buddhagupta, who hailed from Bengal (Allen, 1986: 49). The medieval *Mangal Kavya* texts in Bengali mention trading contacts via both land and sea with Southeast Asia (Ghosh, 2023: 23). However, the beginning of the long-distance commodity-exchanges between the coastal polities of this *mare incognitum* is cloaked in mystery (Glover, 1996: 129). It is widely accepted that these contacts spanned a long historical period from the start of the first millennium BCE to the mid first millennium CE, involving multiple theatres on India's east coast (Ray, 1991: 357). However, this timeline can be stretched back further to the Neolithic (Gupta, 2005: 21). This long-drawn continuity of commercial exchange also indicates a fair amount of cultural cross-fertilization (Manguin, 1996: 191). Of the multiple lines of recent evidences, archaeo-botanical records have challenged the dominant Indianization paradigm in Southeast Asia by shedding light on the earliest known Indian Ocean networks of local seafarers and their maritime trade in local plant resources, viz. spices (Gupta, 2005: 28), cereals (Weber, 1998: 267), and vegetables (Blench, 1996: 417) as early as 3,000 years-ago, with Malaya and Sumatra as probable nautical bases for these perilous crossings (Gupta, 2005: 22). The role of seafaring Austronesians in the early eastward diffusion of cultivated coconuts is mentioned above. It is quite likely that these pioneers may have also set their eyes westwards across the Bay of Bengal (Fuller *et al.*, 2011: 548). The study of Austronesian contribution to Indian culture is neglected. The infusion of Austroasiatic terms for botanical objects into Sanskrit (Bryant, 2001: 94) are linguistic relics of these spirited passages across the Bay of Bengal. Much like the coconut whose fruit is a symbol of identity and holds a special niche in the cultures of both Bengal and Southeast Asia, one of these aforementioned plants is the sugarcane (*sarkara* in Sanskrit) which was also domesticated by Austronesian people in Island Southeast Asia ca. 10,000 years-ago, and first introduced to the South Pacific during prehistoric times and then to South Asia at the end of the second millennium BCE (Daniels and Daniels, 1993: 4). It is not surprising that the Bengali *narikel* (or *narkel*) in east India (and the Hindi *nariel* in north India) for the coconut

etymologically stems from the Sanskrit *narikela*, which in turn is said to be derived from two aboriginal Southeast Asian words *niyor* ('oil') and *kolai* ('nut') (Achaya, 1998: 86). In fact the prefix of this Sanskrit moniker resembles several Austronesian names of the coconut, viz. *niyog* (Filipino), *nyiur* (Malaysian) and *niu* (Balinese) (Table 1). The following sections deal with are cross-cultural studies of the coconut in Bengal and Southeast Asia, through the dual biocultural lenses of food and stories.

Coconut in the Culinary Legacies of Bengal and Southeast Asia

A society's soul is said to be embedded in its cuisine (Freedman, 2007: 7). Culinary heritage, a marker of cultural identity, refers to wisdom and skills related to the food production, preparation, and consumption practices that are handed down the generations in traditional food systems (Brulotte and Di Giovine, 2014: 2). In the field of cultural studies this often neglected intangible cultural heritage is, both tacitly and evidently, inextricably linked with the underlying historical, cultural, and social dimensions of a community (Tannahill, 1995: 7). Across the foodscapes in the hot and wet climes of Asia centred around the Bay of Bengal, the humble coconut is well-known for the remarkable multiplicity of its useful parts, especially the edible fruits as a portable source of food (meat) and drink (water). The most important among its enormous list of practical uses are five food products: coconut water (liquid endosperm), coconut meat (solid endosperm or kernel), coconut milk or cream (from the fresh kernel), coconut oil (from the dried kernel or copra), and coconut sugar or jaggery (from the stem sap) (Watt, 1889: 559). In global business, the coconut is essentially an oil crop that yields an edible vegetable oil, and the copra and its oil (although commercial palm oil refers to the oil palm i.e. *Elaeis guineensis* native to tropical Africa and now widely cultivated in Southeast Asia) are of immense economic value, but all the edible parts of the coconut are important in local fish-rice staple cuisines along the Bay of Bengal. All, except the coconut sugar (called *neera* in Bengali) obtained from the edible sap from the young inflorescence stalk, are obtained from the edible fruits (generally called *narkel* in Bengali), both the green (specifically called *daab* in Bengali) and the brown coconuts. Therefore, it is not surprising that the coconut palm, with its deep cultural roots spread across the Bay of Bengal, is a revered symbol of abundance that embodies the tropical abundance region's ecocultural terrains as another staple not only in the tedium of daily life but also in the euphoria built around festivities. Encased in the pericarp with successive watertight (outer), buoyant (middle), and tough (inner) layers, the cavity of the immature and mature coconut is filled with the edible endosperm. The hollow space of green coconuts is sometimes used for cooking. The cavities of coconuts, especially the green ones, are filled with the refreshing and nutritious coconut water that is

a refreshing natural drink. This is sometimes used for cooking as well. Coconut water is rich in carbohydrates, proteins, and minerals (Parmar *et al.*, 2020: 166). The meat inside the drained nut is scraped off to be eaten either raw or cooked. For its culinary use, the meat is chopped, grated and used fresh or dried, and yields the coconut milk with a creamy texture and unique flavour that is pivotal in shaping the local culinary heritage, especially in Sri Lanka, Thailand, and South India, where it is popularly used in kitchens to thicken sauces, soups, and stews. Coconut meat is also highly nutritious as it is loaded with a plethora of carbohydrates, proteins, lipids, fibres, vitamins and antioxidants (Parmar *et al.*, 2020: 170). In South India and Southeast Asia, and since long before the emergence of the abominable palm oil, this original palm oil is also popular as the traditional cooking medium. Etymologically the Sanskrit *narikela* ('oil nut') points to the antiquity of this modern oil crop (Achaya, 1998: 86). Here, coconut sugar is also used as a traditional sweetening agent. Therefore, the coconut is a common ingredient in the cuisines of India and Southeast Asia, and it has been utilized in myriad culinary applications ranging from sweet to savoury dishes, showcasing its versatility as the basic ingredient in creating iconic flavours that define the foodscapes poised across the Bay of Bengal.

The coconut is a common ingredient in Southeast Asian kitchens and is used in a variety of ways (Esterik, 2008: 36). Fresh water from green coconuts is rarely used in cooking. In Malaysia, the fresh meat is roasted, ground, and add to cooked dishes. However, across this region, it is grated, soaked with hot water, and pressed to prepare the ubiquitous coconut milk that is widely employed in beverages, rice dishes, soups, curries, and desserts to enhance traditional recipes, with its ability to impart a creamy richness and a subtle essence. An interesting implement employed in the traditional Southeast Asian kitchens is the coconut grater stool, perhaps a relic of the material culture of the seafaring Austronesians, that became an essential part of coconut-abundant cultures across the Indo-Pacific (Kirch, 2010: 22). Coconut milk is also frequently used in palace dishes of the royal courts of Thailand and Cambodia, especially the coconut-based soups (Esterik, 2008: 36). Coconut milk, an indispensable for the culinary repertoire of Southeast Asian cooks, continues to permeate the gastronomic heritage of the region. In Thailand, the coconut milk is the key ingredient in cooking rich aromatic curries, such as the renowned *massaman*. Its creamy texture and subtle sweetness balance the flavours of a complex blend of spices, herbs, and meat that never fails to tantalize the taste buds. In Indonesia, the coconut milk plays a pivotal role in *rendang*, a celebrated dish that features tender, slow-cooked meat that is flavoured by simmering in a luscious coconut milk and spice mixture. The coconut milk tenderizes the meat, in addition to rendering a rich creaminess to elevate the dish to a culinary masterpiece.

Many traditional dessert recipes combine coconut milk with palm sugar, including coconut sugar that adds a rich creamy flavour that is hard to replicate with cane sugar. In the Philippines, the coconut milk is commonly used in creating desserts like *ginataan*, a sweet stew made with a medley of fruits, underground crops, and glutinous rice or taro flour balls cooked with palm sugar in boiling coconut milk. This indulgent treat showcases the sweet, velvety traits of the coconut milk, harmonizing with the natural sweetness of the other ingredients to create a delightful symphony of flavours and textures. In Cambodia, a traditional sweet made during the Khmer New Year celebrations is *num kom*. This rice cake is essentially sticky rice dumpling filled with freshly grated coconut, toasted sesame seeds and palm sugar, all wrapped in a banana leaf and steamed. This delicacy is a subtle blend of the spongy blandness of rice, sweet texture of coconut, light crunchiness of sesame seeds, and rich creaminess of palm sugar. Its regional variants are the *mont* in Myanmar, and *klepon* in Indonesia.

In South India, the coconut has a prominent presence and is used to impart a distinct flavour to the traditional dishes. Coconut milk is used to stew vegetables, fish or meat used as accompaniments to *appam* (rice pancakes) with a history stretching back to the early-medieval Cholas who had maritime contacts with Southeast Asia (Achaya, 1998: 46). Grated coconut is used in *chutneys* (condiments) for *idli* (steamed rice cake), and this cooking technique may have travelled from the thalassocratic polities of Indonesia (Achaya, 2003: 80). In contrast, the coconut's footprint in the Bengali kitchens is relatively less visible. In Bengal, blessed with extensive rice paddies braided by waterways rich in aquafauna, both rice and fish are staples as in Southeast Asia. An interesting variant of the *bonti* (cleaver stool) in the kitchens of this floor-oriented culture, is the metal blade of the *kuruni* (coconut grating stool) that ends in a round serrated piece (Banerji, 2001: 81). This has an uncanny similarity with its traditional counterparts from Southeast Asia, such as the Malaysian *kukar*, except for its blade rising like a hooded serpent. Mukundaram Chakravarti in his sixteenth century ballad *Chandimangal*, mentions several dishes. One of the traditional sweetmeat he describes is the *pitha*, an omnipresent rice pancake made with rice batter, and generously filled with jaggery-infused roasted sesame and grated coconut, and often consumed with a sweet sauce of date palm molasses. This was a ceremonial food item at that time. The sweet filling of coconut and jaggery is still used during the festival seasons to prepare the Bengal-style *ladoos* (dessert balls) called *narkel naru*. These, and variants in next-door Assamese and Odia cuisines, have an uncanny resemblance to the traditional sweet rice cakes made during festivities in Southeast Asia. In the nineteenth century, the Bengali bourgeoisie detesting animal meat, preferred delicacies such as crab and turtle meat cooked with grated coconut (Majumdar,

1979: 17). A relatively recent culinary innovation is the quintessential Bengali dish called *chingri malaikari* (Chaudhuri, 2002: 275). This name is conventionally conceded to refer to the creamy texture stew of either *bagda* (tiger) or *galda* (king) *chingri* (prawn), infused in a gravy is prepared with coconut milk. The dish could literally mean ‘cream curry’. There isn’t much basis to this theory other than the assumption the word *malai* denotes coconut cream, instead of the conventional dairy cream. Instead, the prefix *malai* is rooted in the geographical term Malaya (Malaya peninsula), and thus *malaikari* literally means ‘Malayan Curry’. The presence of similar dishes in the Malaysian cuisine points to the possibility that this sea food dish was influenced by the people of Malaya. Two dishes, the *chin-malay kari udang* (coconut prawn curry), and *laksa* (coconut prawn soup), appear to be distant cousins of Bengal’s adorable prawn stew. Then there is a significant historical record that indicates that traders sailed from Southeast Asia along the spice route to many trading ports in this part of the subcontinent, going as far back as 8th to 12th centuries during the Pala Dynasty (Ghosh, 2023: 28) and Chandra Dynasty (Ghosh, 2023: 28). This continued up to the early modern commerce between South and Southeast Asia. The pattern of trade across these regions was structured, and one trading route in particular was the straits of Malacca in Malaysia. These trade links were accompanied by a wider exchange of languages, cultures, and ideas, and in this case cuisine. Another traditional festive dish originates from the eastern part of Bengal is *daab chingri*, another prawn curry variant that is inventively cooked and served in a green coconut shell along with its thin layer of creamy meat inside. This has a touch of the Portuguese steaming technique, known as *bhapa* in Bengali. Once again, the flavour profile of this dish can also be easily compared to those of Southeast Asian cuisines, especially *laksa*. Thus, even though this seafood preparation is spiced up with the rich local flavours of Bengal, it has been influenced by multiple cuisines from across the seas.

Coconut in the Oral Traditions of Bengal and Southeast Asia

Stories that parents and grandparents tell their young ones, serve the dual purpose of leisure and education (Bruchac, 2010). Oral tradition is an umbrella term for varied systems of human communication wherein memories, ideas, laws, arts, knowledge are recorded, preserved, interpreted by word-of-mouth, and transmitted down the generations (Nogueira, 2003: 164). This verbal-aural form of intangible cultural heritage testifies to the ability of the brain to learn, memorize and repeat complex and sophisticated structures sans any writing system. Oral literature categories include myths, legends, poems, epics, chants, lullaby, proverbs and riddles, among others. South and Southeast Asia

have rich and heterogeneous repertoire of folk literature that have influenced each other through long periods of trade and cultural contacts. In *Valmiki Ramayana* (Book III), verse 13 of chapter-35 describing the sylvan elements mentions the coconut palm (Roy, 2022: 35). This epic tale is popular in folk cultures around the Bay of Bengal. The interaction between the written text and its oral performance is vibrant in South and Southeast Asia, where oral and textual traditions share a interwoven past (Sears and Flueckiger, 1991: 2). Furthermore, in the Ramayana texts, lands beyond the eastern sea (Bay of Bengal) in Southeast Asia are described with names such as *Narikeladvipa*, the ‘island of coconuts’ (Sagoo, 2020), pointing to a long intertwining with ecological history.

In Southeast Asia (and Oceania), the coconut tree is called *Pokok Seribu Guna* (‘Tree of a Thousand Uses’ in Malaysian), reflecting its value in every aspect of daily life. There are many myths and legends about this tree across the region that is considered as its cradle (Roosman, 1970: 219). In Tonga, a Samoan origination myth of coconut from an eel recounts the tragic love between moon goddess Sina and eel god Tuna. *Her paramour eventually gets killed, and his buried head germinates into a coconut tree. Their love-child climbs up the palm tree harvests the first fruit and discovers its usefulness for their people. Each nut bearing the eel’s face served as a poignant souvenir* (Craig, 2004: 88). This legend portrays the spirit of discovery of the early Austronesian explorers in the untold story of their migration from Island Southeast Asia and the colonization of the South Pacific. Every part of the plant was useful, and the story describes the de-husking of the fruits, weaving of the fronds for thatching and basketry, and use of the trunk as construction material or firewood. In New Guinea, a similar Papuan legend on origin recounts the birth of the first coconut tree from the head of a dead woman, specifically her skull whose anatomical marks were visible on the nut inside (Z’graggen, 1983: 277). In Indonesia, the story of the food deity Hainuwele or ‘Coconut Girl’ is another creation myth that prominently figures in Wemale and Alune folklore of the Maluku Islands (Campbell, 1959: 174). She was born out of a coconut palm. After providing the people with necessities and luxuries, she is killed and her body cut into several pieces, which are then thrown over the island. From each part of her body a coconut tree grows. A Javanese folklore narrates how fruit-bearing plants originated from the body parts of a dead girl, including the coconut palms from the head (Taryo, 1984: 9). In Tahiti, a couple of popular folksongs are *Niu-ola-hik* (‘O life-giving coconut’) and *Niuloa-hiki* (‘O far-travelling coconut’) (Ahuja *et al.*, 2014: 222). In the Philippines, the riddles “*Langit sa itaas/ Daga sa ibabaw/ May tubig sa tahaw*” (Heaven above/ Earth on top/ Water in the middle), and “*Tubig sa rikan dikan/ Dai nauuranan*” (Water in the tank there/ Doesn’t get wet by rain), both refer to the

coconut, especially the refreshing coconut water (Maloles and Imran, 1970: 5). In Thailand, the proverb “*Kob nai ka la*” (Frog under the coconut shell) is a metaphor, often used in contemporary political sphere and refers to thinking outside the box (Kasetsiri, 2022: 149).

In India, Kosambi (1972: 243) attributes the historical progress of the littoral polities to the introduction of the coconut that became the foundation of their coastal economies. In the *Indic high culture* this palm was believed to be one among the five *Devavrikshas* (‘Trees of the Gods’ in Sanskrit) on account of the multiplicity of its uses, especially for the edible fruits. In classical mythology, the origin myth of the palm tree attributes its creation to the sage Vishwamitra (Gupta, 1991: 123). There are botanical references to coconuts in ancient medical treatises such as the *Vrikshayurveda* (ca. 800 CE), *Sushruta Samhita* (c. 400 BCE), and *Charaka Samhita* (ca. 600 BCE) (Ahuja *et al.*, 2014: 227). In the South where coconuts are integral to the local culture, the root for names for coconut in is *ten* (‘south’), and *tenaki* (‘nut fruit from the south’), pointing to its origin from across the Bay of Bengal (Ahuja *et al.*, 2014: 223). The *Sangam* literature (100 BCE–400 CE) also refers to coconut (Aiyer, 1956: 74). The Tamil riddle “*Ici nulaiyata kinattile orupati tannir*” (Needle cannot enter into the well where a gallon of water is stored) bears a simple clue to the usefulness of coconut water (Santhi, 1993: 139). The Tamil proverb “*Oru kurumabaiyai kollarudhu, onpathu thennai nattathirku camam*” (Killing of a *kurumbai* insect that damages coconut flowers is equivalent to planting of nine coconut trees) conveys traditional farming knowledge about the pest management of this crop (Ahuja *et al.*, 2014: 243). With its lush groves, Kerala has adopted the coconut tree as the state tree. In Bengal, from the earliest literary works to the present day, the oral literature is rich in proverbs, rhymes, riddles, songs, that are intertwined with the verdant terrain and its flora and fauna. Here, with coconut plantations spotted across the rice paddies stretching from the sea to the foothills, the vivid folklore in Bengali teems with axioms and conundrums about the coconut tree that embodies a rich intangible cultural heritage about the traditional farming techniques of the crop and the usefulness of its fruits in its ecocultural landscape. In rural Bengal, poems attributed to the fabled eleventh-century astrologer Khana from the Pala period called *Khanar Bachan*, embody traditional wisdom related to farming and food habits that constitutes a traditional manual for farmers and still influences the rhythms of agrarian life. Some of these timeless insightful saying reveal the practical knowhow of coconut farming and the immense subsistence value of this palm. Many of these have been analyzed by Sudeshna Basak (2010). “*Khona bole shune jao/ Narkel mule chita dao/ Gach hoy taja mota/ Taratari dhore gota*”. This quatrain recounts traditional nutrient management as a green farming practice. It instructs

to recycle farmyard debris such as cow dung and rice straw by applying them at the base of coconut trees to favour growth and allow early fruit setting. “*Guo narikel nere ro/ Ama tuchure kanthal bho*”. This couplet mentions an interesting farming practice. Shaking the base of coconut and betel nut saplings while planting produces healthy and strong palms, but the same practice produces smaller mangoes and unproductive jackfruit trees. “*Goye gabor, banshe mati/ Aphala narikel shikor kati*”. This couplet mentions yet another useful farming practice. One should apply manure for betel nut palms, earth-up soil for bamboos, and trim roots for fruitless coconut trees, to increase the yield of all the three plantation crops. Trimming the fibrous roots is considered to cure sterility in coconut (Mohanty *et al.*, 2008: 21). “*Datar narikel bakhiler bansh/ Kome na bare baro mash*”. This couplet also provides insights about the plantation crops. One must show generosity with coconuts by harvesting them, sparing with bamboos by leaving the wild, this, rather than dwindle, would make them grows well throughout the year. “*Teen naray supauri sona/ Teen naray karkel tana/ Teen naray shreephol bel/ Teen naray gerosto gel*”. This quatrain provides more knowhow about plantation crops. Transplanting beetle nut and wood apple saplings is favourable, but doing the same with coconut stunts their growth, just like the harm done by changing the homestead. “*Sonre boli cashar pol/ Kola narkel krome rol/ Narkel bar supari aat/ Er ghono tokhone kat*”. This quatrain instructs farmers to space coconut saplings 12 feet apart (and betel nut 8 feet apart) while planting for their optimal growth them and to remove old leaves when they touch each other to prevent disease. “*Narkeler gorai mati/ Suparir gora kati*”. This couplet is also related to cultural practices. The plantation crop is favoured by putting soil at the base of coconut tree, and clearing betel nut trees by cutting at the base. A related couplet “*Narkel gache nun mati/ Shigro shigro bandhe guti*” is a directive to apply salt to the soil of coconut trees to increase their productivity. This practice is corroborated by the sixteenth century botanical treatise *Vishvavallabha* (c. 1577 AD) which recommends regularly applying of salt to the soil (Sadhale, 2004: 134). These time-tested maxims are not just wise sayings but also vehicles of traditional ecological knowledge and farming skills about cultivating this plantation crop. Sila Basak (2006) published her field survey of riddles collected from different corners of West Bengal and Bangladesh. It is a comprehensive volume on Bengali riddles and their socio-cultural background, with its subject from nature to daily chores, and covers rites and rituals. Language used to express riddles is often redundant, ornamental, or in rhyme form and its meaning is concealed, to be found through clues. “*Age cham pore lom/ Pare had tarpur mansa sese rakta/ Kao ta bostu ta ki bastay kara ba asakta*”. This riddle from Barisal (Bangladesh) provides clues about describing the coconut by using comparison with the

human anatomy. It says first skin, then hair, then bone, and then flesh and blood. ‘What is it and who are fond of it?’ “*Allahr ki kudrat/ Gacher aage sherbet*”. This riddle from Sirajganj (Bangladesh) describes the food value of the coconut water: ‘What a blessing of the Lord, beverage on a treetop’. “*Nak ache hache na/ Chul ache bandhe na/ Marle kande na*”. This riddle from Mymensingh (Bangladesh) hints at the facial features of the coconut: ‘Has a nose but does not sneeze, has hair but does not tie, hit him does not cry. What is it?’ “*Phaler bhitor anek jol*”. This simple riddle from Jalpaiguri (West Bengal) also refers to the coconut water in both green and brown coconuts: ‘Plenty of water in the fruit’. “*Jol thake/ Mach nei*”. This is another simple riddle from Bankura (West Bengal) also refers to the coconut water: ‘Has water but no fish’. These age-old puzzles not only playfully spoke of interest in local natural resources, but also embody folk insights into the socio-economic and even medicinal value of this plant.

Conclusion

In the ecocultural context, the historical and geographical links between Bengal and Southeast Asia are not only profound, but are also largely uncharted in academic terrains. With lush tropical natural and human-modified ecosystems that are rich in biological resources, these environments are indeed reflected in the traditional culture therein and offer valuable insights into how human contacts may have helped to bridge the vast spatial and temporal differences. In the geological past, Southeast Asia was made of continental fragments from ancient landmasses of Gondwanan in the south that make most of India, and Cathaysian in the north that form a major part of China, that were assembled through millions of years ago and have contributed to the uniqueness and richness of the land and its flora and fauna. The long history of human habitation in this region has also molded not only the nature and culture of this region, but also of adjoining and even distant ones. Today, this land of ‘Asian tiger economies’, encompassing clusters of numerous islands and masses of mainland terrains located between the two ancient civilizations of India and China, Southeast Asia has been at the core of long-distance exodus and trade for centuries, possibly millennia. Thus, Southeast Asia’s rich heritage embodies a tapestry of innovative forms that harmoniously weaves together the rich threads of not only the elements of nature and culture, but also the facets of indigenous and exotic, in its unique traditions. Plants, including the shy coconut with its amazing gift of floating fruits that provide a portable source of food and drink—two breads and a glass of water, although rooted in the soil are amazingly mobile and can transcend boundaries, are largely neglected by not only scholars, but also

the general public. In 2024, ASEAN completes 57 years, but the cultural contacts between India and ASEAN go much further back in time to at least two millennia, and earlier Indian Ocean connections that developed before the historical period have also been established. This connected past informs the present through an interplay of memory and history that shapes our understanding of a period when the present political boundaries of nation states did not exist. These rich contexts of past relations that encompass the domains of commerce, culture, and religion, make this relationship unique and distinct in the contemporary world order. It was in the 1990's when both sides started to further renew and strengthen their old ties. One of the key drivers of this was India's 'Look East' Policy (1991) and the 'Act East' Policy (2014). At present, there is a convergence of economic and political interests and the future holds the promise of even greater synergy of bilateral and multilateral ties. As people are continuously rediscovering and working on the past linkages, people-to-people ties will see further intensification as well as greater collaboration between India and Southeast Asia based on a deeper understanding of profound historical connectivity and better appreciation of their shared heritage. What is of essence is that past connectivity between India and Indosphere continues to be reflected in myriad ways in the day-to-day lives of the people of Bengal and Southeast Asia. Because of the ancient trade relations in existence since ancient, perhaps prehistoric times, languages too have occupied a crucial position in the history of these two neighbouring regions. This can be corroborated from the names by which the ancient Indians referred to Southeast Asia, that is, *Suvarnabhoomi* ('Land of Gold' in Sanskrit), referring to the natural riches encountered during overseas trade voyages. In the context of this study another Indian moniker *Narikeladvipa* ('Island of Coconuts' in Sanskrit) for Southeast Asia gives an idea of the immensity of the traditional value conferred to coconuts on both sides of the Bay of Bengal. Metaphorically ingrained in the sacredness of this tree and its fruit as an essential element in traditional rituals and ceremonies, including as a biomorphic motif in rituals art, the coconut presence has transcended cultural borders to embody a spiritual connection with the cosmos that has endured through generations. The uncanny similarities of Bengal and Southeast Asia is in the recipes cooked in traditional kitchens including a ordinary kitchen tool used for grating the soft meat of the cocoanut. At the same time in stories narrated in traditional homes, in everyday life and during ceremonies, about the much familiar coconut are unswerving testimonies to the deep roots of the commonality of human experience and emotion across ecocultural landscapes that are shaped by the timelessness of the incessant movement of plants and humans across the Bay of Bengal.

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Table 1: Names of the coconut and coconut tree in the local languages of South and Southeast Asia across the Bay of Bengal.

South Asia			Southeast Asia		
Language	Country	Name	Language	Country	Name
Bengali	Bangladesh	<i>Narikel</i>	Balinese	Indonesia	<i>Niu</i>
	India		Burmese	Myanmar	<i>Aonesee</i>
Hindi	India	<i>Nariel</i>	Filipino	Philippines	<i>Niyog</i>
Odia	India	<i>Nardiya</i>	Javanese	Indonesia	<i>Kelapa</i>
Sinhala	Sri Lanka	<i>Pol</i>	Khmer	Cambodia	<i>Daung</i>
Telugu	India	<i>Kobbari</i>	Malay	Malaysia	<i>Nyiur</i>
Tamil	India	<i>Tenkay</i>	Thai	Thailand	<i>Maphraw</i>
	Sri Lanka		Vietnamese	Vietnam	<i>Dua</i>

Modified from Gupta, 2005: 225-226.

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