



Geographies of fairs of West Bengal: spatio-temporal and cultural narratives

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Accepted: 15 September 2023

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Abstract Fairs often speak about the people and their embedded place. As an expressive space, fair mirrors the culture of the community and the emotional bond. The study unravels the fairs of West Bengal, an eastern state of India by exploring the physicality and the culture of a place that are momentous for the origin of fairs and their continuity through the generations. Thus, it is imperative to explore the diversities of fairs both in rural and urban settings of Bengal. Here, we used the available secondary data for entire Bengal to map out the regional patterns of fairs. Categorically, all the fairs were filtered using selected criteria and finally 979 were considered for the study out of 2023 by using Census data. Finding of the study reveals the regional patterns of fairs, which further tells on the spatio-temporal narratives along with the story of the traditionality and urban–rural connection with fairs. Again, the contribution of

this paper establishes the linkages among the physical attributes, cultural imprint and fairs.

Keywords Fair and festival · Spatio-temporal · Diversity of fairs · Culture · West Bengal

Introduction

Fairs are cultural celebrations which often speak the stories of the people, and accentuate the uniqueness of place. Fairs and festivals have proliferated significantly in both urban and rural landscapes in the recent era (Wilson et al., 2017; Fisker et al., 2021). The term ‘fair’ can be conjugated as an expressive space, where people affirm their belonging, their roots, and regenerate their culture (Phipps, 2016). By definition, fairs exhibit public events in open spaces, fields, parks and downtown areas (Bankston & Henry, 2000). Indian fairs, as fascinated as they can be staged anywhere—be it in a narrow lane, or even in the vicinity of a pond. Well assimilated into the diverse Indian culture, fairs play a significant role in transposing the continuity of tradition and cultural heritage by providing temporal and spatial connections (Black, 2016). It is a social space marked with diversity and an exemplar of multiculturalism (Haynes & Mogilnicka, 2022). In general, the very substance of fairs and festivals

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encompass all kinds of beliefs (social, aesthetic, spiritual and others), moral principles, and values¹ (material, social, appreciative, and utility). The fairs and festivals are witnessed to be associated with the production, negotiation, and transaction of different forms of values, by the means of various cultural commodities (creative products) such as art works, books, fashion items, music, films, wine, and so on. Subsequently, the qualitative symbolic value of that particular space transforms into quantitative economic value (Moeran & Pedersen, 2009).

Indian scholars believe that fairs (*mela*)² is organized for three major goals (*tribarga*)³ of action in life—*dharma*, *artha*, *kama* (Kurin, 1985). The Indian fairs exhibit a plethora of regional diversity, often manifesting across different cultural regions.⁴ It is conceived as a culturally appropriate setting for a variety of ritual, performance, craft, commercial, aesthetic and culinary traditions (ibid). The traditional fair⁵ which includes mass gatherings with entertainment, not only serves social functions, but also marks one of the most colourful illustrations of the history of commerce (Çalışkan, 2018). Commodity fairs,⁶ livestock fairs,⁷ trade fairs⁸ and job fairs⁹ represent cultural plurality, and fulfil different economic purposes (Bankston & Henry, 2000; Munjal, 2015). In this article, we shall point out the rich diversities in fairs of West Bengal, which with

its synthesised unique cultural material, justifiably merits academic discussion. The association of that particular land with spatio-temporal dimensions; the modifications and impressions which the regional ‘culture’ of that ‘place’ imprints on the fairs, are some of the focusing concerns for this article.

This article explores the mapping of the multifarious categories of fairs in West Bengal, and its worth in terms of diversity and spatio-cultural alignment. Given the increasing number of fairs proliferating across the diverse social settings, the study intends to address the gap in literature through empirical data covered by the Census of India denoting the mapping of diverse fairs and unravelling the imprint of physicality and culture in spatio-temporal narratives with particular reference to West Bengal. The entire paper is mainly divided into three sections. The first section highlights the rich diversity of West Bengal’s fairs accompanied with examples. The following sections encompass the spatial narratives, the temporal sequence, besides expounding how the place contributes towards the origin, and the continuation and growth of the fairs through the generations. The final section focuses on investigating how the factors of physical space value and cultural dissemination matters in the context of these fairs.

Literature review

Studies conducted on the history of fairs have shed light on the presence of agricultural fairs (Kniffen, 1951; Mihalik & Ferguson, 1994; Mitchell, 2007), commodity and livestock fairs (Allix, 1922; Mitchell, 2007), although traditional fairs have also been extensively mentioned (Liu et al., 2022; Çalışkan 2018; Mitra 1953). Religious-devotional and ritual-based fairs have also drawn considerable attention from few scholars (Sadat et al., 2020; Sati, 2021; Ruback et al., 2008). The recent emergence of new kinds of fairs like the food fair (Stojanović et al., 2020; Folgado-Fernández et al., 2019), the music fair (Richardson, 2019; Tan et al., 2020) have also been studied. Book fairs (Evain & Carolan, 2014), noted as a commercialised fair; the world fair with its exhibition of a plethora of commodities and artefacts integrating different cultures from countries all over the world (Kendall, 2017; Rydell et al., 2000; Breckenridge, 1989); along

¹ Values are simply criteria which help people to judge what is legitimate (Suchman 1995: 574) and worthwhile in their daily lives (Moeran, 2009: 8).

² In Indian context fair is denoted as *mela* what is meant for culturally appropriate setting for a variety of rituals, tradition and aesthetics (Kurin, 1985: 66).

³ Three major aims of life according to Indian philosophy i.e., *dharma*, *artha*, *karma* (ibid).

⁴ The regions which are divided culturally (linguistic division).

⁵ Çalışkan defines traditional fairs, “the known prototypes of which date back to the antiquity and which had their golden age particularly in Europe in the Middle Ages, have been quite long-lasting trade structures in the world as they have many functions (e.g., economic, social, religious, and entertainment) altogether”.

⁶ Fair started as a means of periodic gathering of products to exchange (Allix 1922: 533).

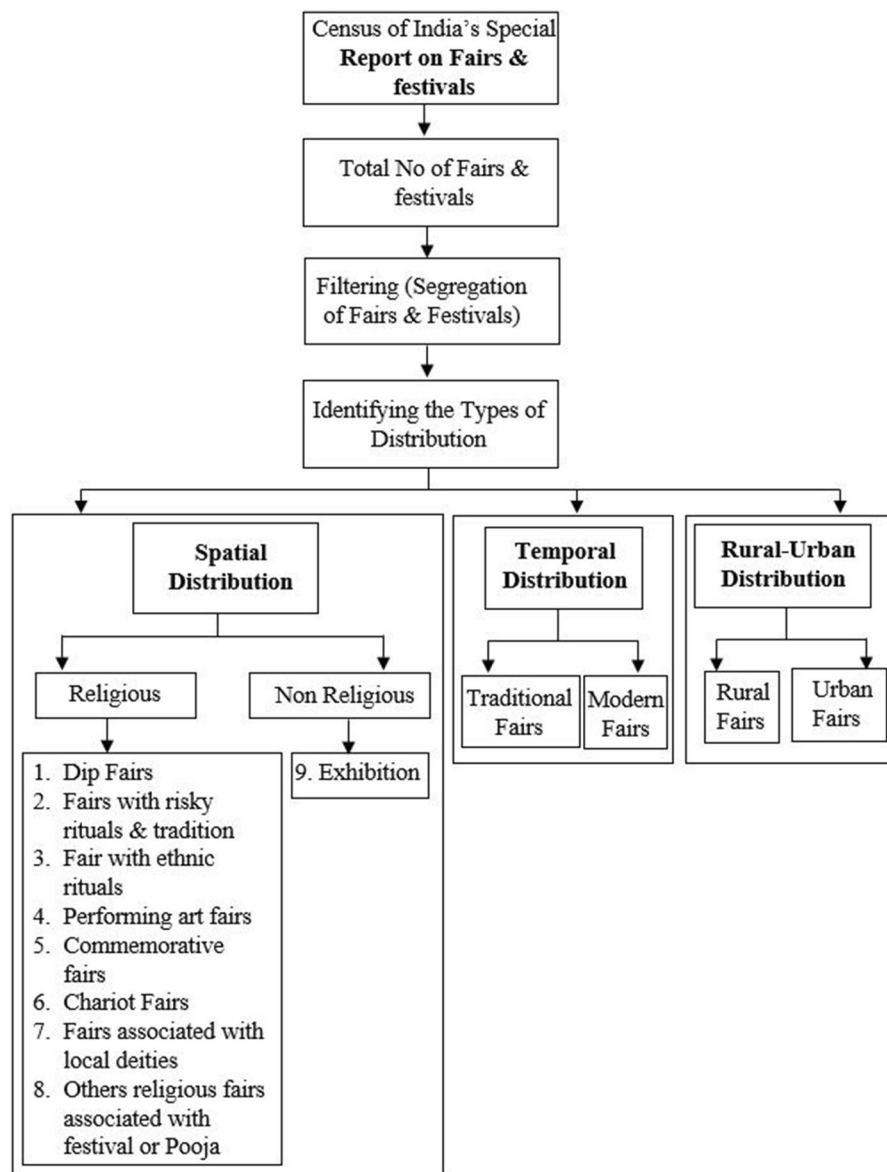
⁷ Commodity fair with the more extended sphere, the livestock fair (for instance: cattle fair) (Ibid).

⁸ Trade fairs were grown out of the medieval town markets and gradually it remains as retail market (Skov 2006: 771).

⁹ The fair where employers, recruiters, job seekers and various sectors of jobs are connected (Beam 2016: 16).

Table 1 Types and characteristics of fairs *Source:* Compiled by authors

Broad category	Sub type	Characteristics	Example
Religious fairs	Dip fairs	Holy/devotional dip in the holy water Associated with rituals based on regional belief/mythology Traditionally linked with water bodies; associated with religious values and belief systems Becomes a part of tradition and culture Relevant in the Indian context	Kumbh mela or Magh mela (Ruback et al., 2008) Gangasagar mela (Sati, 2021: 94)
	Risky ritual fairs	Associated with risky rituals and practises Varies across regions & religions	Charak fair of the Hindus Muharram among the Muslims
	Ethnic fairs	Associated with tribal communities, tribal identities Tribal rituals and practices Often attached to natural objects/tribal culture	Jhapan snake fair, Bishnupur and Bankura (Ali 2015) Chata Parab fair in Purulia of West Bengal (Mitra, 1961)
	Performing art fairs	The congregation associated with artistic performances Centred around religious beliefs & traditions	Gajan fair, Gambhira fair in Maldah (Mitra, 1961)
	Commemorative fairs	Organized for the remembrance of Incarnate/Guru/Pir/influential or influential person The basic aim is to promote certain idea/ideology/belief Often associated with specific groups or believers/followers	Ramkelir mela is celebrated in the commemoration of Shri Chaitanya dev Pirbaba abirbhaber mela in Murshidabad (Mitra, 1961)
Non-Religious fair	Chariot fairs	Associated with Lord Jagannath/ Jagannathian culture Arranged during Rath Yatra Pulling of chariot	Maresh Rath Mela (Mitra, 1961)
	Local deity fairs	Centred around local/regional deities Practices & beliefs widely vary across regions/ places	Chandir Mela, Ganga Mela, Bisalaxmir Mela (Mitra, 1961)
	Festival/ puja related fairs	The fairs which are commonly found in places during any puja/festivals	Durgapujar mela, Kalipujar mela (Mitra, 1961)
	Exhibition and Trade fairs	Mostly focusing on the non-religious matter Exhibition fair The main purpose is to promote trade	Pradarsani mela, Kalimpong (Mitra, 1961) Horticulture fairs Pirer Utsav mela, Gangarampur, West Dinajpur (Mitra, 1961)

Fig. 1 Methodology

with state fairs (Mihalik & Ferguson, 1994) are collated with the notion of the modern fair. Ethnic fair in Natalia Coimbra De Sá's study (Coimbra De Sá, 2012), snake charmers' fair (Lorea 2018; Ali & Ali, 2015), indigenous fairs (Banik & Mukhopadhyay, 2020) have also been explored under the umbrella of the Indian fairs.

It has been found that handicraft fairs often link tourism with women's participation (Thomas, 2022; Wut et al., 2021; Le Mare, 2012; Hutchens, 2010); while tourism for cultural attraction (Kim et al., 2007; Banik & Mukhopadhyay, 2020) and cultural awareness of local traditions (Stankova &

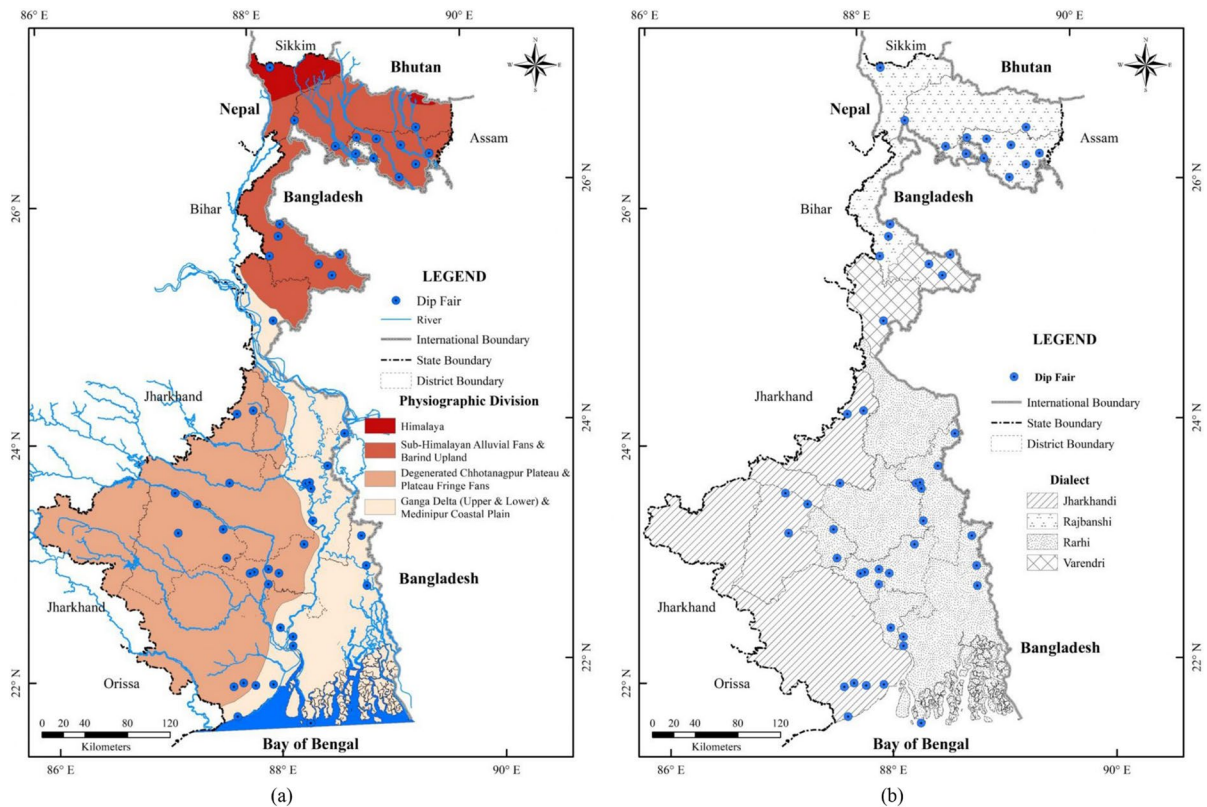


Fig. 2 Dip fair associated with physiographic division, (a) and dialect (b)

Vassenska, 2015) leads to ‘Cultural Tourism’ (Razaq & Vignali, 2010). It is further evident that art fairs lead to economic upliftment of the artisans (Lee & Lee, 2016; Doherty et al., 2015; Naka, 2013). Nonetheless, there are also discourses in which the problems and challenges (Shah & Patel, 2017) faced by the artisans have been addressed. Ethnic art, heavily commercialized for profit, has become a part of Indian economy (Esperanza, 2008). Socio-cultural perspectives on the commercialization of fairs have been found (Bankston & Henry, 2000; Lyck et al., 2012; Richardson, 2019; Sharma & Sharma, 2015). In this context, we can add the terms which are discoursed widely in terms of fairs and festivals in recent era: cross-cultural negotiation (Phipps, 2016),

resource mobilization (Vestrum & Rasmussen, 2013), urban regeneration (Fisker et al., 2022; Smith, 2012), social cohesion, integration, spatial identity formation (Atkinson et al., 2008; Duffy, 2005), cultural values (Rabago, 2021), socialisation (Barbeitos et al., 2014; Çalişkan 2018), opportunities for rural communities (George, 2015), food culture (Stojanović et al., 2020), potential community based tourism (Banik & Mukhopadhyay, 2020; Munjal, 2015), economic dynamics (Lee & Lee, 2016), and stakeholders’ living (George, 2015).

A festival can potentially connect both traditional and contemporary aspects of a place, and build “a link between global space of flows and local space of place” (Richards et al., 2013). The festival has the

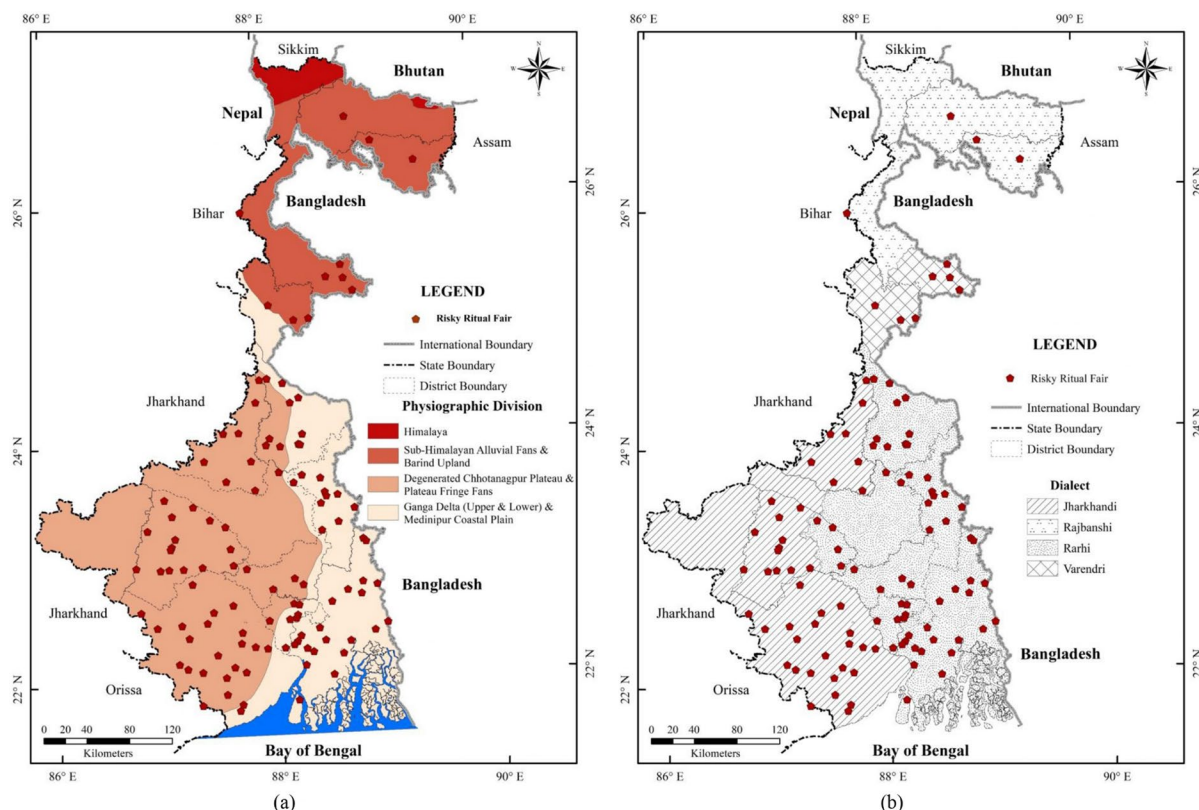


Fig. 3 Risky ritual fair associated with physiographic division, (a) and dialect (b)

duality of being locally rooted, and simultaneously branching out beyond the spatial boundaries of place (Black, 2016). Indisputably, the festival space is conceived through the interpenetrating temporalities and inherent histories of local settings (Haynes & Mogilnicka, 2022). It is found to contribute to the place-branding of destinations (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2015; Finkel & Platt, 2020; Herstein & Berger, 2014; Jago et al., 2008). Communal identity, another strong discourse, added the participatory dimension of the community, coming to celebrate and reinforce the distinctiveness of a place (Balfour, 2014; Duffy, 2005). Studies have uncovered the role of cultural heritage-based festivals in identity formation; and have also highlighted how spatial heritage reveals

the representational displays of meaning (Atkinson et al., 2008; Bitušíková, 2020; Duffy, 2005; Fisker et al., 2019).

Materials and methods

The paper is based on the secondary data available with Census of India's special report on "Fairs and festivals of West Bengal (পশ্চিমবঙ্গে মেলো ও পার্বণ)", *General Report, Part I-A, Vol-XVI, West Bengal* published by the *Register General of the Census of India* in the year 1961. The report reflects the State's religious centres and festivals, inland trade and commerce to those who seeks quality research. It is

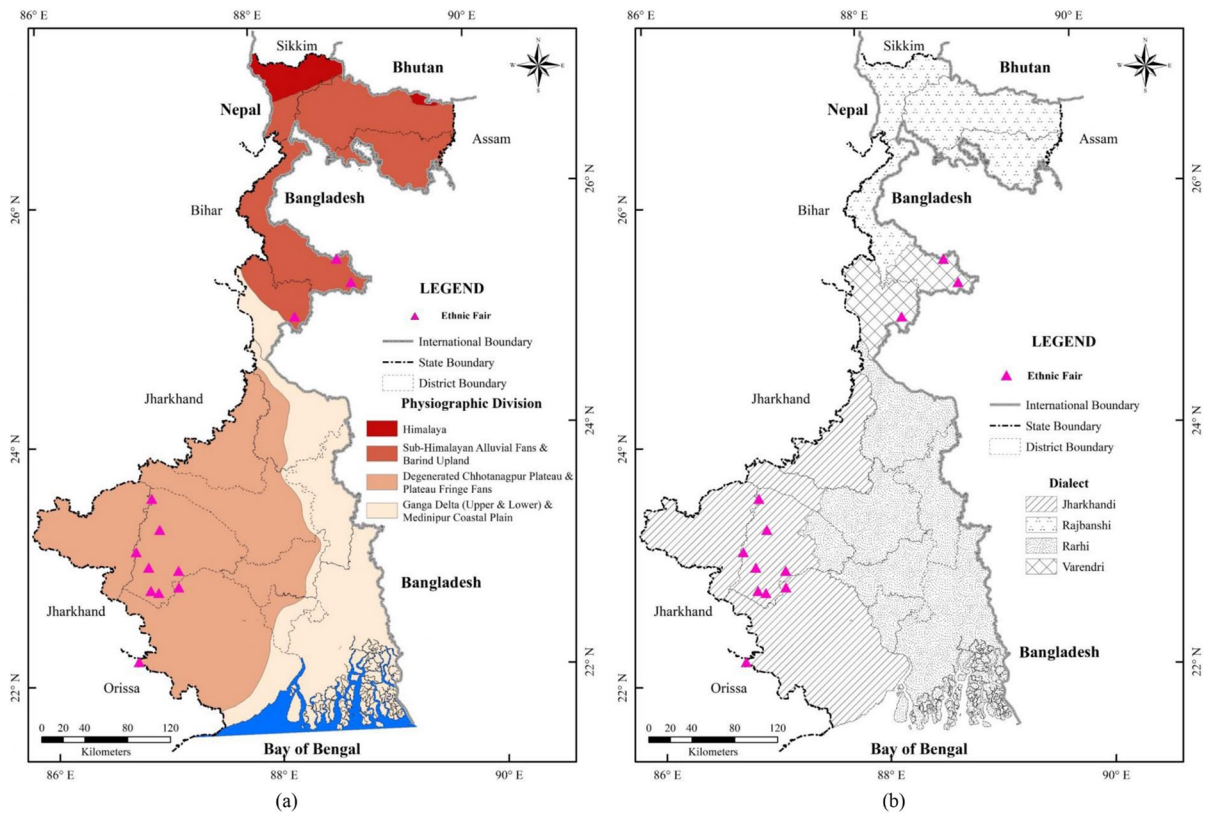


Fig. 4 Ethnic fair associated with physiographic division, (a) and dialect (b)

an extensively covered (throughout the state) baseline data initiated by the Census of India, where the importance of this data is mentioned as, “Such a list would be of great help to commerce, art motifs and designs, circuits of trade, ancient trade routes, and special manufactures. It would give the student of toponymy much valuable clue and the student of history much valuable insight into the organisation of markets”. Our objective was to portray the descriptive essence of this data in analytical form. Significantly, the total number of fairs and festivals enlisted in the report is 2023, by using the basic filter (the fairs which are having detail descriptions) we have selected 979 fairs from the combine list of fairs and festivals. The data set used as main source of information for the study.

Fairs are classified on the basis of the function around which all other functions revolve—the ‘central function’. Coming to spatial distribution, fairs have been categorised into nine major types based on its central function (Table 1). Furthermore, to explore the temporal dimensions, 979 fairs have been classified into major two categories: traditional and modern, based on their years of origin. The traditional fair includes the fairs of pre-1860’s, and the latter category, modern fair constitutes the fairs of post-1860. The year 1860 was chosen as a definitive threshold owing to its relation with history in Bengal since British colonialism appeared to modernise thinking (Srinivas, 1972). In order to understand the locational settings of the fairs, we have classified

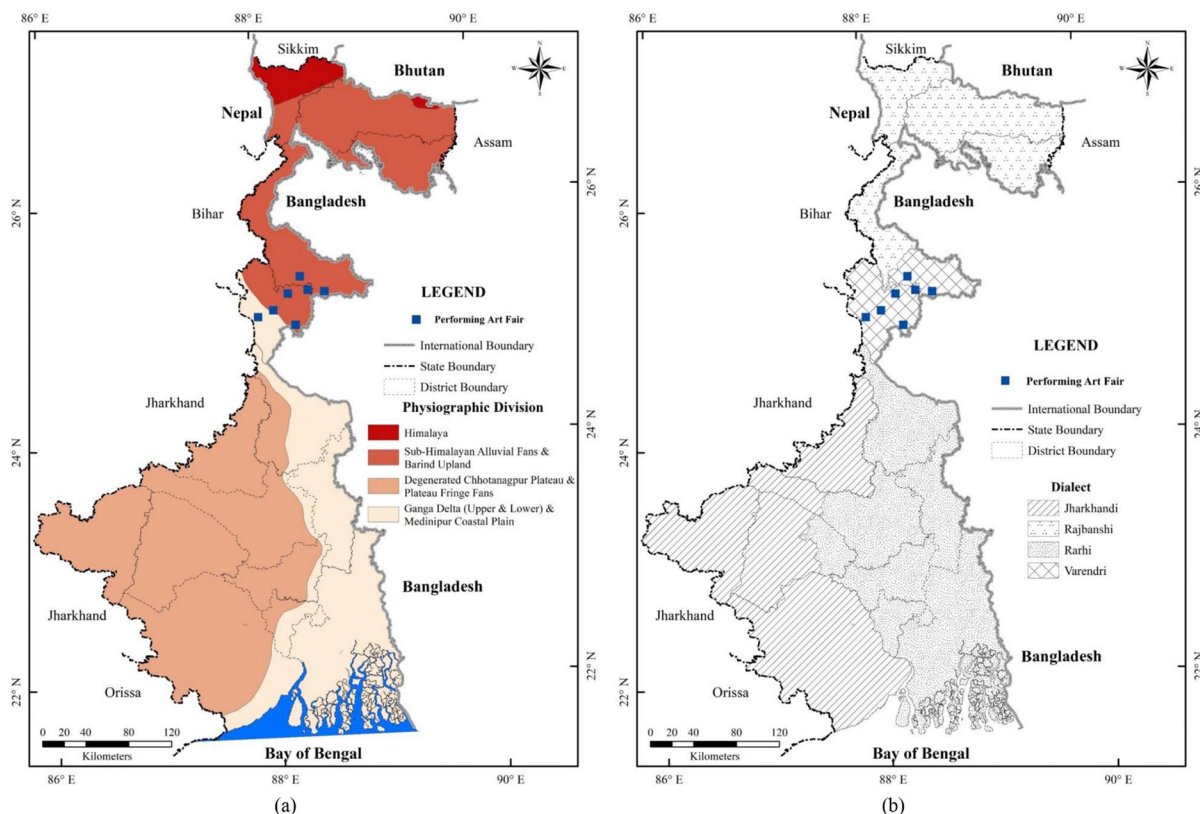


Fig. 5 Performing art fair associated with physiographic division, (a) and dialect (b)

fairs into two major sub types: rural and urban fairs (See Fig. 1). To incorporate the maps, we have considered the physiographic division of West Bengal, created by Bandyopadhyay, because of its minute divisions with districts inset (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2014).

Diversity highlights

This section includes the fairs which mirror the inseparable relation with the cultural and historical tradition, where people are exposed to their cultural heritage. Hundreds of regional deities of West Bengal are being worshipped along with fairs proliferating

throughout the land. Some examples are: Karthik puja and Aparajita puja mela (in Murarai), Dharma mayer mela (in Nalhati), Maghibrata Utsav mela (in Rampurhat), Ghagrasini puja mela (in Rinpur), Bisalaxmi and Rankini puja mela (in chandrakana), Kalia damar uthsaver mela (in Daspur), Sitala puja mela (in Ghatal), Bhim Ekadashi (in Taluk), Akshay Tiritiya mela (in Ramnagar), Satyanarayan and Basulipuja puja mela (in Pataspur), Brahamhani puja mela (in Kharagpur) and so on. Interestingly, some fairs are related to sacred bathing and dipping in the ocean, rivers, pond and other water bodies. Such examples are of Paush Sankranti and Manasha puja mela (in Nakashipra), Akkhin Snaner mela (in Shyampur), Magh mela (in Pandua), Poush mela

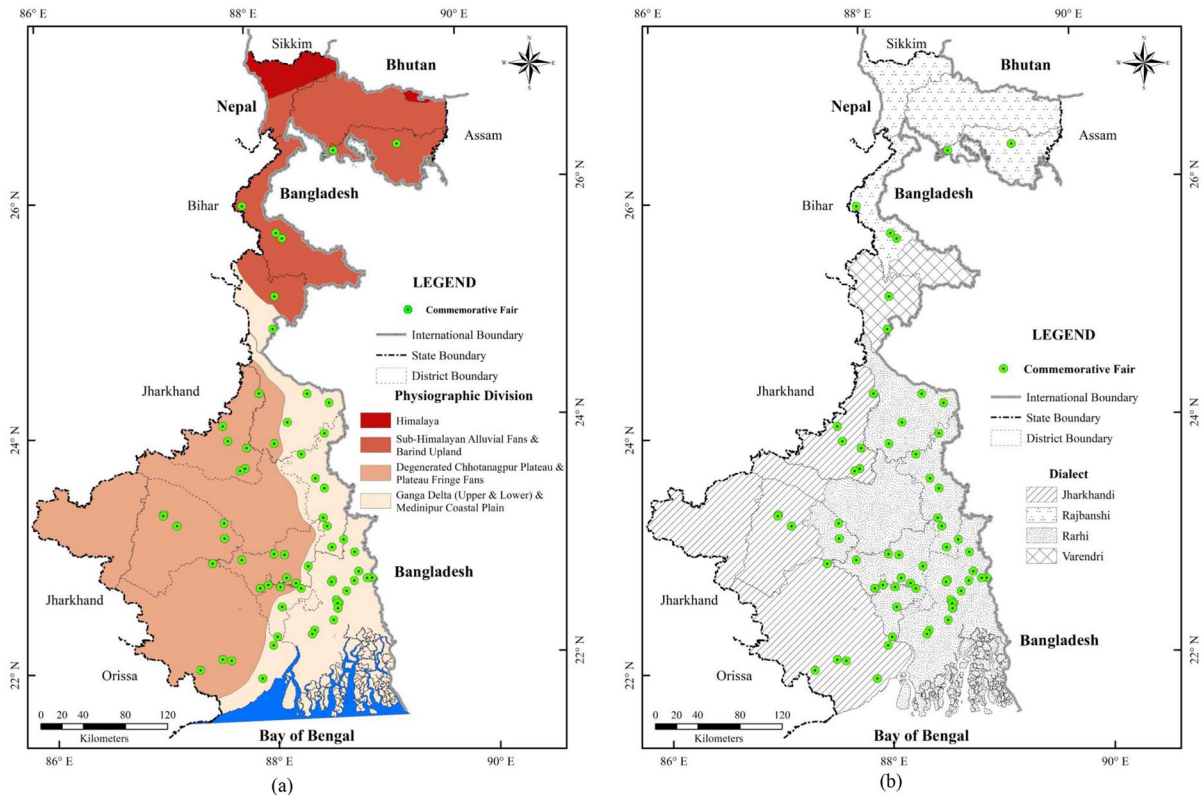


Fig. 6 Commorative fair associated with physiographic division, (a) and dialect (b)

(in khejuri), Dasahara (in English bazar), Maghi Purnima mela (in Ratuya), Baruni Snaner mela (in Balurghat), Makar Snaner mela (in Raiganj), Sankranti mela (in Itahar), Ashok astamir mela (in Tufanganj), Ashtami snaner mela (in Alipurduar), Uttaryan snaner mela (in Beldanga) etc. Some fairs also comprise of risky rituals like the Maharam mela (in Ratuya), the Charak mela (in Balurghat). Ethnic fairs also collate diversities in the cultural arena. Shib puja mela and Sajnadighir mela (in Habibpur), Santhali ustav mela (in Balurghat), Chhata o chitiya (in kumarganj and Khatra), Nagardola Parab and Bhadu ustav (in Bankura) are some of the examples of this category. Associated with the name of some great persons, there are some commemorative fairs that are observed throughout the land: Gandhi mela

(in Mahisadal), Ramkeli mela (in English bazar), Bais hajari and Chhay hajari mela (in Gajal), Pir mela (in Raiganj), Tirobhab ustav (in coachbihar), Abirbhaber o tirobhaber mela (in Nalhati). Chariot fairs like Rathjattr mela (in Kaliyachak) are also a common occurrence here.

Spatial narratives of fairs

Fairs and festivals are considered as a consistent positive space where native people actively represent themselves and their cultures. It can be noticed how a space can be associated with the fair—where ethnic people are congregated for their indigenous tradition is the ethnic fair; another space associated

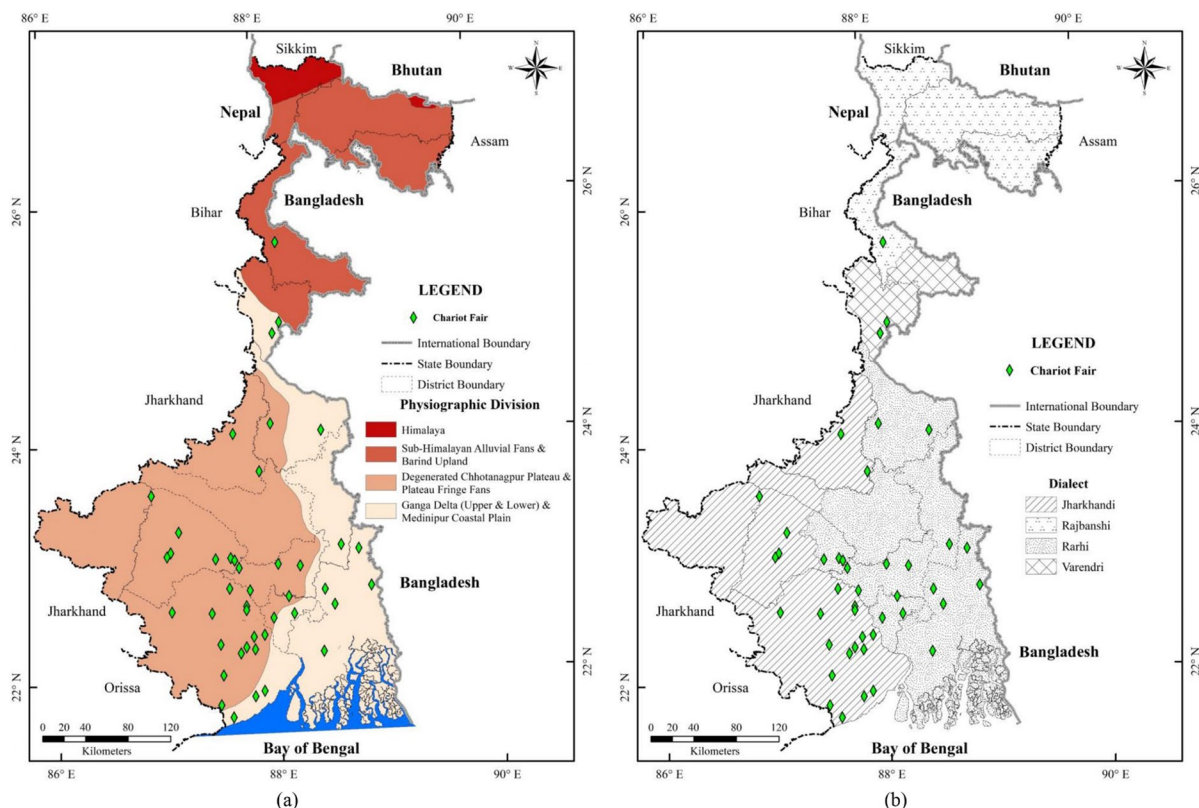


Fig. 7 Chariot fair associated with physiographic division, (a) and dialect (b)

with the commemoration of the great persons, is the commemorative fair. Spaces can be known for their cultural activities, like the Manasa fair of snake charmers, or the Baul fairs which revolve around the lives of minstrels. In order to understand the spatiality in a better way, the fair has been categorised accordingly (Table 1).

Dip fairs are solely concentrated in the vicinity of a particular ocean, a river, or a pond which is considered as sacred (See Fig. 2a). Fairs with risky rituals are mostly concentrated in the southern districts of the West Bengal, consisting of two physiographic regions: the Ganga Delta and the degenerated plateau (See Fig. 3a). In case of fairs with ethnic rituals, the concentration is mainly in the degenerated

plateau (See Fig. 4a). Performing art fairs are mainly associated with sub-Himalayan alluvial fan and Barind upland alluvial fan (See Fig. 5a). Commemorative fairs and chariot fairs are mainly observed in Southern Bengal (See Fig. 6a). The degenerated plateau region is predominantly associated with local deity fair (See Figs. 7, 8a). Others religious fairs associated with festival/ puja are found throughout West Bengal, except the Himalayan region (See Fig. 9a). Non-religious fairs like exhibition fairs, trade fairs, job fairs are a rare occurrence in the Ganga delta region but prevalent in urban spaces (See Fig. 10a).

A fair can be of multiple types at the same time. Likewise, taking dip in river or lake is not

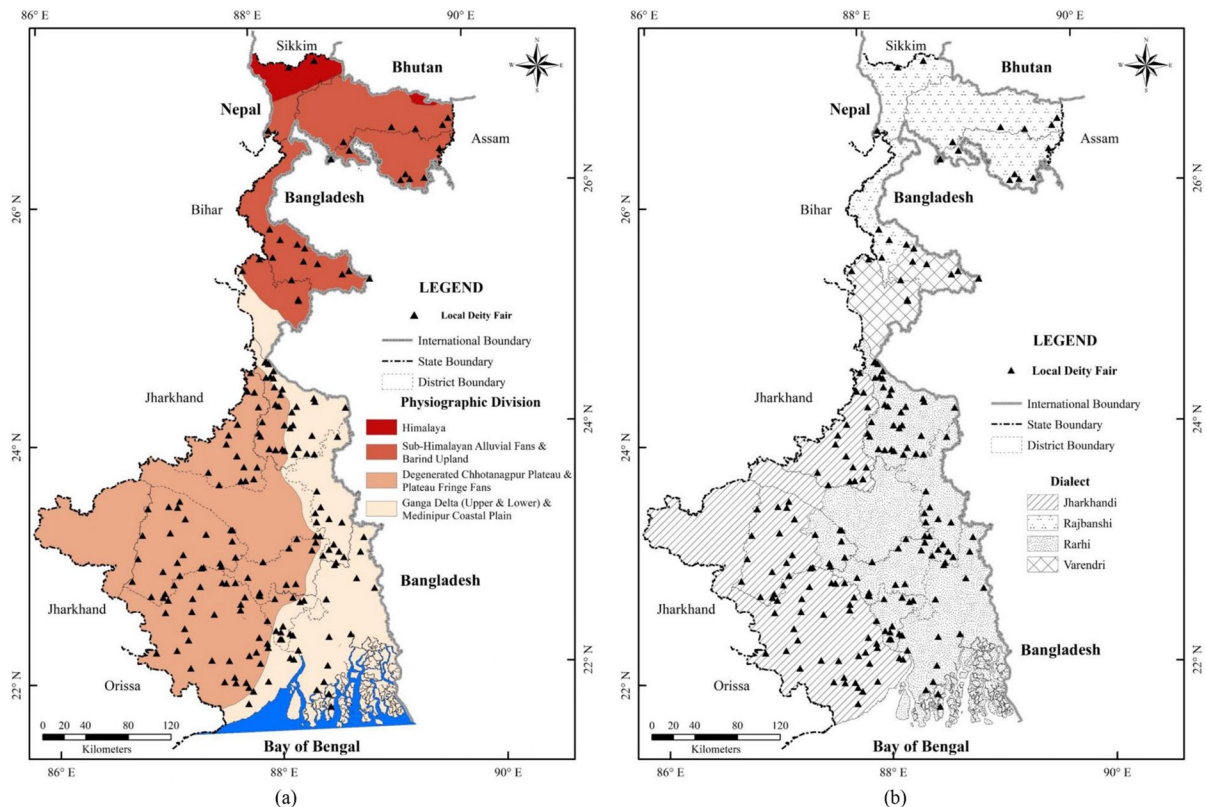


Fig. 8 Local deity fair associated with physiographic division, (a) and dialect (b)

always associated with rituals based on regional belief or mythology, often it is pan-Indian in nature. For instance, Makar Sankranti is possibly the most popular festival of this subtype that marks the transition of the sun from the zodiac of Sagittarius (Dhanu) to Capricorn (Makara), roughly corresponding with end of winter agricultural season. Simultaneously, it is a commemorative festival in certain places; for example, at Kenduli of West Bengal, it is associated with the commemoration of the medieval poet Jaidev.

Dip fairs mostly manifest in vicinity of ocean, rivers because waterbodies are worshipped as embodiments of goddess in Indian society. Our literature review reveals some of the dip fairs that have been studied in light of cultural value (Sati, 2021), others have explored the economic aspect of dip fairs, owing

to their impact on stakeholders' livelihood (Ruback et al., 2008). Ethnic fairs (mostly tribal fairs) like Chata Parab, Karam Parab, Bhadu, Disum Sendra are concentrated in Southwest of Bengal due to the higher concentration of tribal people in this part. Fairs associated with performing arts are found mainly in Dinajpur, Malda and Birbhum Districts. Performing art¹⁰ fairs include the Gambhira fair (Saadat et al., 2020), the Gajan fair, and the Boul fair. Art fairs which serve as exhibitions of varied things, and integrate different cultures across the world are found from literature (Lee & Lee, 2016; Doherty et al., 2015; Naka, 2013), state fairs too have been found from literature (Mihalik & Ferguson, 1994). Total 3% of fairs were found non-religious (exhibition, trade fairs, job fairs) and

¹⁰ This type of fair is consisting with cultural performances (Mitra 1960).

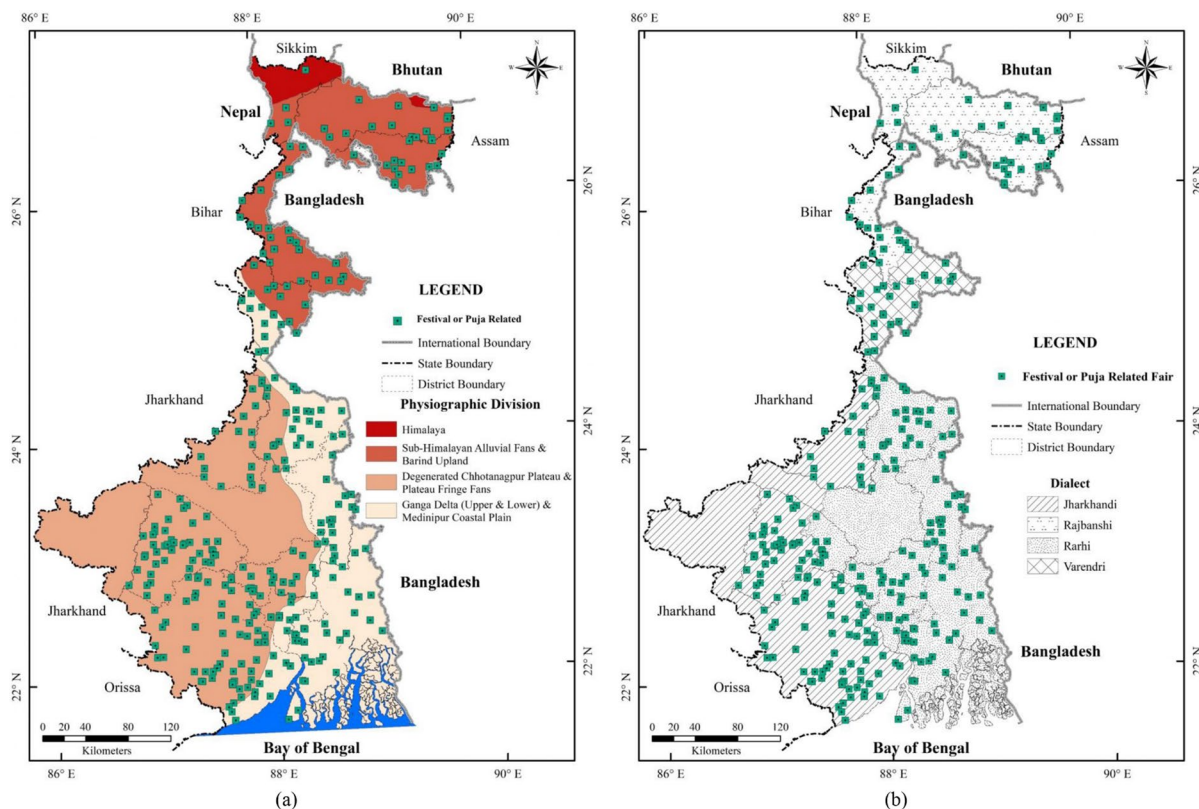


Fig. 9 Festival or Puja related fair associated with physiographic division, (a) and dialect (b)

most of these are observed in the northernmost part of West Bengal, in the Darjeeling district (Table 2). Handicraft fairs, art fairs, tourism driven fairs are mentioned herewith (Thomas, 2022; Wut et al., 2021; Le Mare, 2012; Hutchens, 2010).

Temporal boundedness

The historical context of the development of any event cannot be ignored for its significant imprint (Bitušíková, 2020). Particularly, fairs carry that imprint as means of symbolic and material implications, produced through spatial and temporal processes (Haynes & Mogilnicka, 2022). In this accordance, fairs which are temporally and

geographically bounded are being widely celebrated events that must be accounted for their historical past. The reflections of the past and anticipation of the future connect the fairs with the place and the people concerned. We are concerned for the existence of huge numbers of fairs in West Bengal and how the fairs are temporally conceived. Later on, the study reveals two types of fairs: traditional and modern. Around 88% of traditional fairs (Table 3) are associated with the degenerated plateau and the Ganga delta region. Even though the modern fairs are seen all over the state, the concentration is relatively higher in southern part of Bengal (Figs. 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15).

Around 40% of the fairs are denoted as traditional fairs having exclusively traditional characteristics.

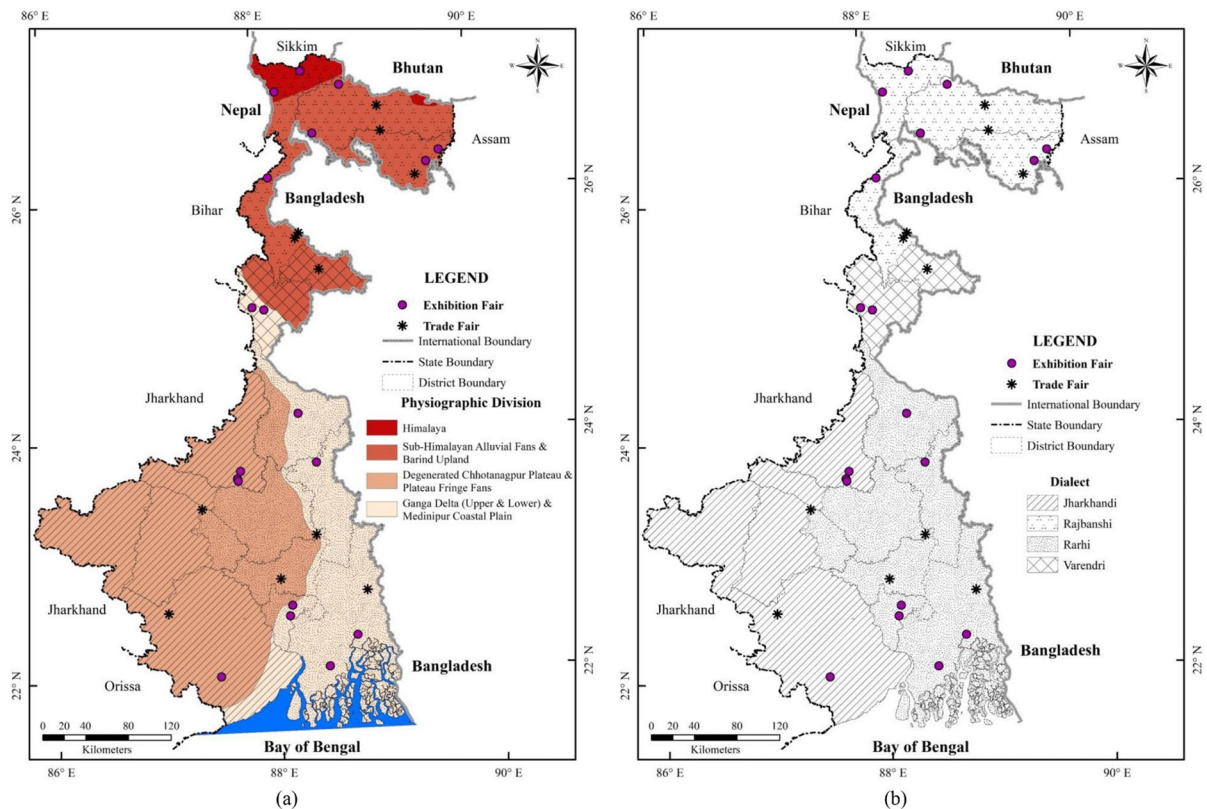


Fig. 10 Exhibition and trade fair associated with physiographic division, (a) and dialect (b)

Owing to their religious nature, they mark the amalgamation between religion and fair. Modern fairs are higher in number in compared to traditional fairs. The traditional fairs are concentrated mostly in Degenerated Chhotanagpur plateau and the plateau fringe fan region. On the other hand, the Himalayan region serves as the setting for mostly modern fairs (See Fig. 12a). The similarity (mostly in Degenerated Chhotanagpur plateau and plateau fringe fan region) exhibited regarding the pattern for the modern fairs though the concentration of modern fairs is observed throughout.

Place embeddedness

Place is often emphasised having distinctive spirit or personality (Derrett, 2008). It is noteworthy of how the place of a fair carries and adds to a sense of local identity. Authenticity and uniqueness play the contributing factors in construction of the local identity and a sense of attachment (Young & Kaczmarek, 2008). These traits help cities to strengthen their marketing and branding strategies (Bitušiková, 2020). In this article, place is conceived both as urban and rural. The data source has included a greater number of rural fairs (833) with the identity of indigenous people, while the remaining are the urban fairs (67).

Table 2 Spatial Distribution of Fair in Different Physiographic zone *Source:* Compiled by authors

Physiographic region	Dip Fair	Risky ritual fairs	Ethnic Fairs	Performing art fairs	Commemorative fairs	Chariot fair	Local DEITY FAIR	Festival or puja related fair	Exhibition and trade fairs
Himalayas (Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri)	1.2	0	0	0	0	0	2.46	3.69	1.23
Sub-Himalayan Alluvial Fans and Barind Uplands (W. Dinajpur, Darjeeling g, Jalpaiguri, Koch Bihar ar, Maldahh Degenerated Chhotanagpur Plateau and Plateau Fringe Fans (Bankura, Birbhum, Haora, Hugli, Murshidabad, Medinipur)	2.1	1.23	0.34	0.56	0.78	0.34	3.58	8.39	1.01
	1.8	6.26	1.23	0	2.8	3.47	11.74	16.44	0.78
Ganga Delta (Upper and Lower) and Medinipur Coastal Plain (Haora, Hugli, Maldah, Murshidabad, Nadia, 24 Parganas, Medinipur)	2.5	5.37	0.11	0.34	3.91	2.24	8.5	12.53	0.67

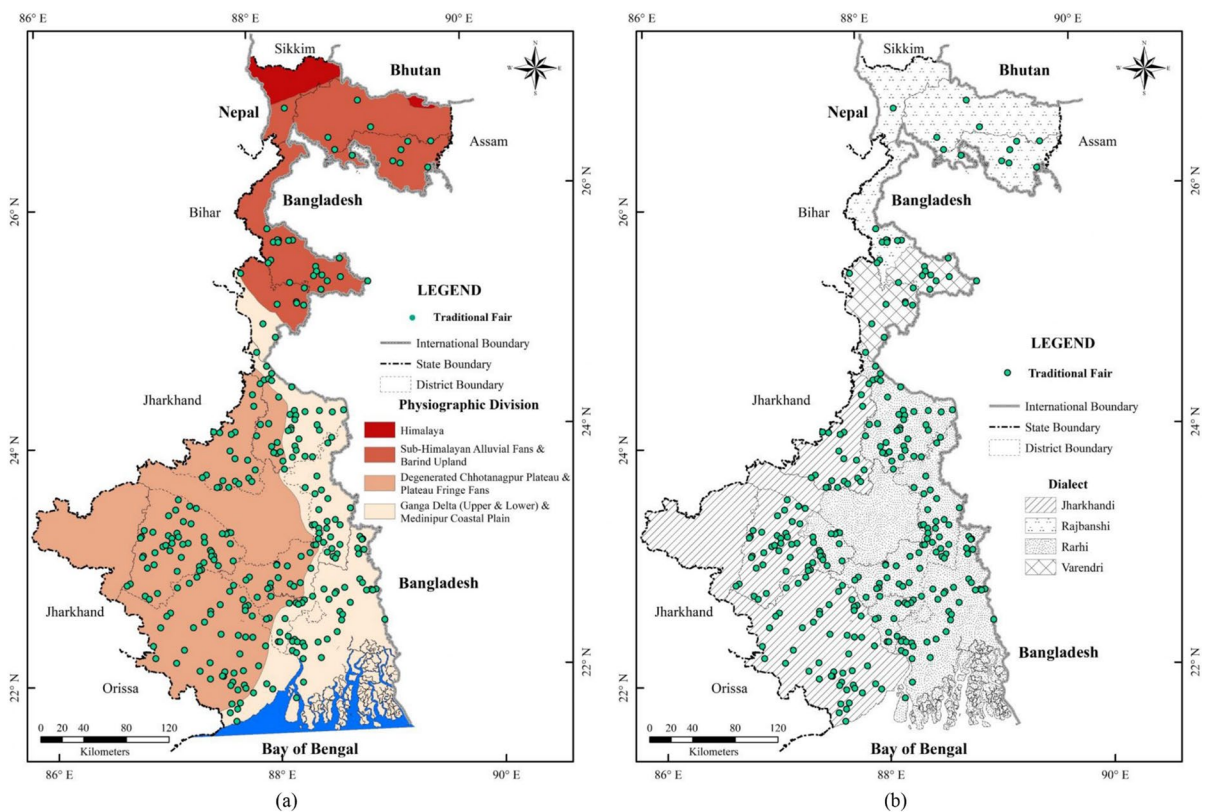
Table 3 Temporal distribution of fair in different physiographic zone *Source:* Compiled by authors

Physiographic Region	Age—More than 100 years (%)	Age—less than 100 years (%)
Himalayas (Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri)	0.11	0.88
Sub-Himalayan Alluvial Fans and Barind Uplands (W. Dinajpur, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Koch Bihar, Maldah)	4.09	14.60
Degenerated Chhotanagpur Plateau and Plateau Fringe Fans (Bankura, Birbhum, Haora, Hugli, Murshidabad, Medinipur)	16.81	27.43
Ganga Delta (Upper and Lower) and Medinipur Coastal Plain (Haora, Hugli, Maldah, Murshidabad, Nadia, 24 Parganas, Medinipur)	14.27	22.01

Notably, the degenerated plateau region owns the maximum place for accumulation of rural fairs.

Around 95% of fairs take place in rural areas, therefore, proving the strong relationship between fairs and rural life (Table 4). In this respect, the patterns of rural fairs are mostly observed in the degenerated Chhotanagpur plateau and the plateau fringe

fan region, because ethnic fairs are enriched with rural culture. Urban fairs are mostly found in the Ganga delta region. Often fairs in urban areas are equated with the notion of modern fairs (Bankston & Henry, 2000; Munjal, 2015). Literature review reveals the urban fairs like music fair (Tan et al., 2020), food fair are newly-emerged varieties of fair

**Fig. 11** Traditional fair associated with physiographic division, (a) and dialect (b)

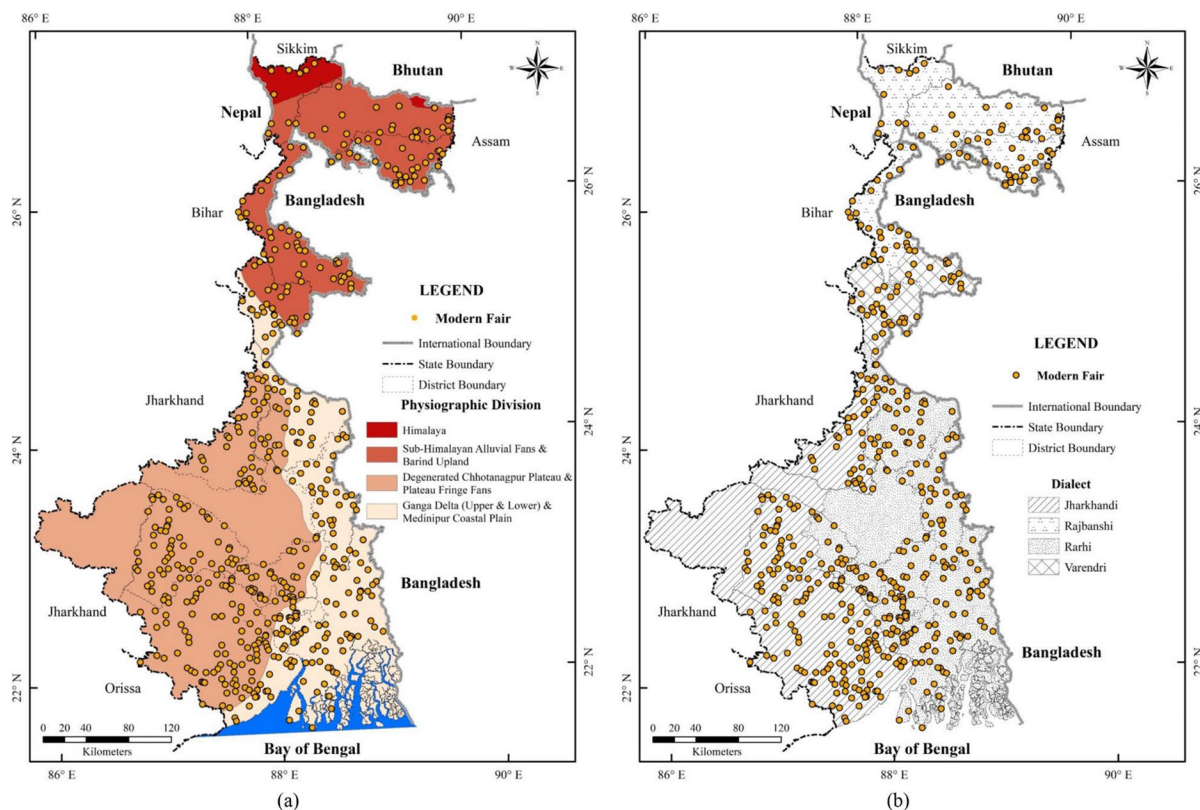


Fig. 12 Modern fair associated with physiographic division, (a) and dialect (b)

(Stojanović et al., 2020; Folgado-Fernández et al., 2019). Book fairs (Evain & Carolan, 2014) has been noted as commercialised fair. World fairs, state fairs (Mihalik & Ferguson, 1994), as means of exhibition fairs, have also been discussed (Kendall, 2017).

Fair follows both ‘physiography’ and ‘culture’

In the previous sections, the study has revealed the relationship between physiography and fairs. The next question that arises is whether there are any cultural imprints over the history of the origination of fairs and their continuation from generations to generation. The study has further looked through the cultural region emphasized in the schemes laid down by Suniti Kumar Chatterji (1926), Sukumar (1965), M. Morrison (1970) which are discussed in details below:

The linguistic division of Bengal by both Sukumar sen and Suniti Kumar Chatterji have stated 4 and 5 regions respectively, that denotes the idea of regional division based on the pronunciation of Bengali language and other socio-cultural scenarios. Only, the dialect of ‘Vanga’ has been excluded from the study because it does not fall under West Bengal. The study deduced that the fairs are clearly aligned with the cultural regions are concerned. For instance: Jharkhandi linguistic division are enriched with tribal communities, so ethnic fairs are solely concentrated in that region. The distribution of fairs based on the concerned culture is presented visually for various types of fairs, such as dip fair (See Fig. 2b), commemorative fair (See Fig. 6b), local deity fair (See Fig. 8b) and so on. The detailed findings from spatial, temporal, and urban–rural distribution from the perspective of cultural region are described below (Tables 5, 6):

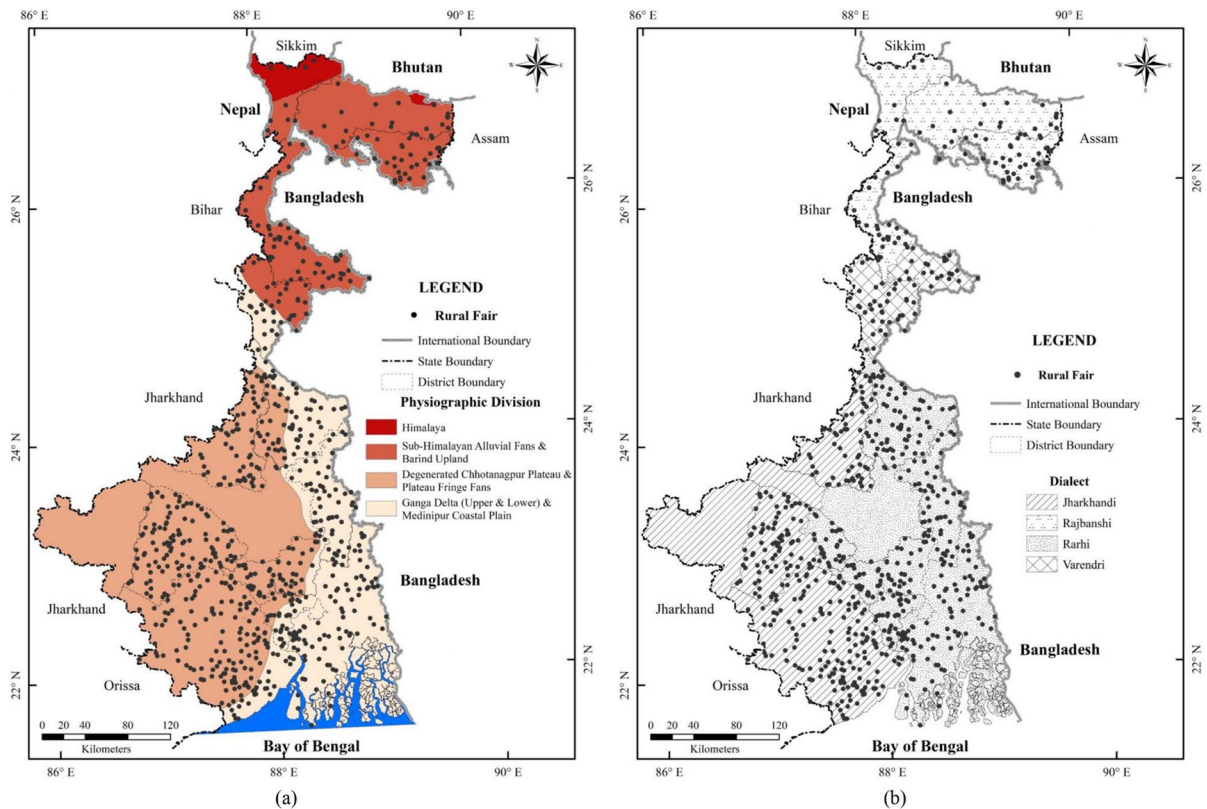


Fig. 13 Rural fair associated with physiographic division, (a) and dialect (b)

Conclusion

In the light of culture and place, the fair mirrors the several colours of spectrum, that we have already seen. Geographers and other social scientists have also made important contributions in the discourse of spatio-temporal and cultural analysis of festivals and particularly of fairs. In Indian context, that is a significant stage for multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multilingual exchange, fairs are conceived as a major tool to strengthen the local identity, traditional handicrafts, cuisine and folklore (Bítušíková, 2020). Additionally, indigenous cultural festivals are also considered as a powerful medium for cross-cultural contact, wherein diverse ethnic groups overlap and intersect with each other differently in their various roles (Haynes & Mogilnicka, 2022).

Present study significantly contributes in terms of the West Bengal's fairs for having its religious signage (Sadat et al. 2020), social functions, cultural attachments, economic exposures, funfair

entertainment and nostalgia. Place also matters as people's attachment and the infused culture is often borne out of it. In view of spatial analysis, the fair adjoins the essence of place, physiography and indeed the cultural distinctiveness. Unarguably, the fairs of West Bengal, mapped out here with some typologies manifests the internal diversities (dip fair, chariot fairs, exhibition fair, ethnic fairs, commemorative fairs, performing art fairs) and associated spatial patterns. Fairs have been analysed with the spatial concentration in terms of physiography of West Bengal. The Northern mountainous region has some fair specifications (dip and modern fairs); while the sub-Himalayan region specifies some of other fairs (Dip fair, Local deity fair). Similarly, the degenerated plateau region covers some of the other unique fairs (ethnic fair, risky ritual fairs). The Ganga Delta plain region also exhibits its diversities (particularly in its commemorative fair, fairs associated with festivals / puja). Additionally temporal distribution has shed light on traditional fairs

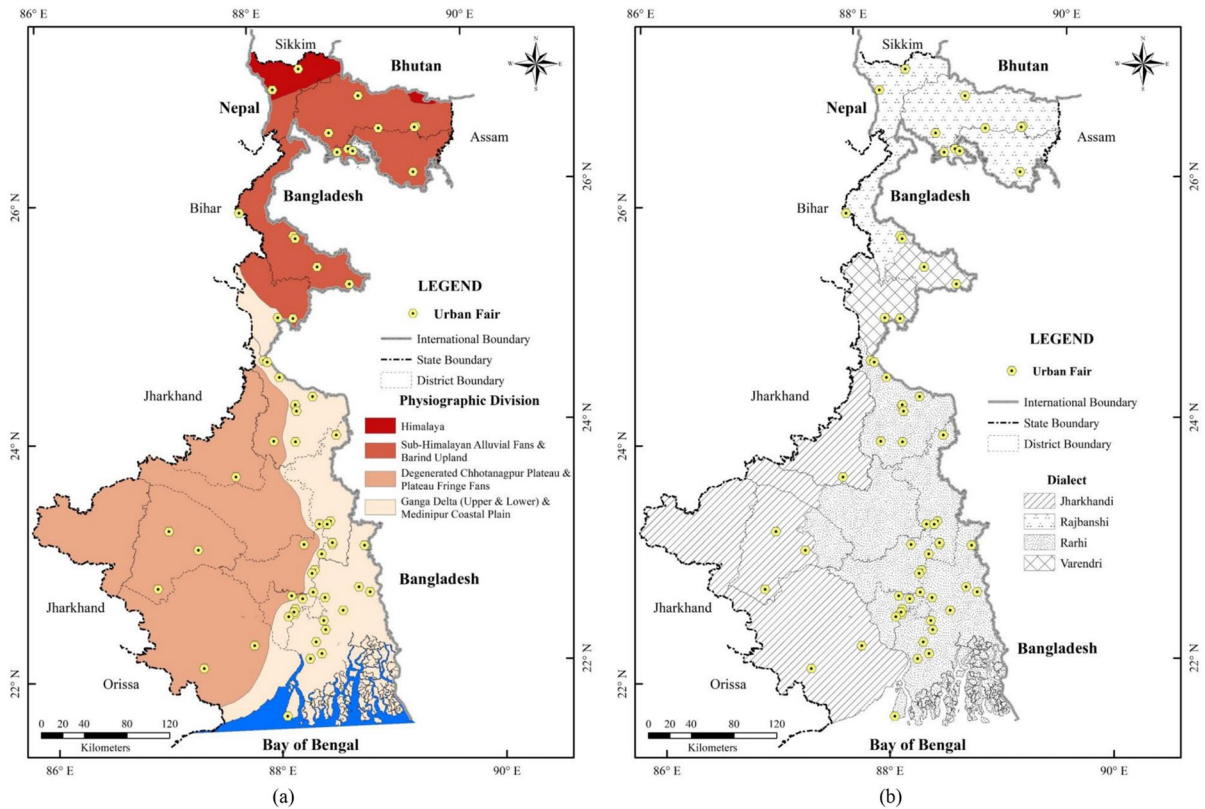


Fig. 14 Urban fair associated with physiographic division, (a) and dialect (b)



Fig. 15 Instances of fair **a** traditional fair (Dip in Gangasagar, W. B.) and **b** modern fair (Food fair, in Kolkata)

Table 4 Urban and rural fair in different physiographic region *Source:* Compiled by authors

Physiographic region	Urban fairs (%)	Rural fairs (%)
Himalayas (Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri)	0.11	0.78
Sub-Himalayan Alluvial Fans & Barind Uplands (W. Dinajpur, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Koch Bihar, Maldah)	1.68	15.90
Degenerated Chhotanagpur Plateau & Plateau Fringe Fans (Bankura, Birbhum, Haora, Hugli, Murshidabad, Medinipur)	1.90	44.79
Ganga Delta (Upper & Lower) & Medinipur Coastal Plain (Haora, Hugli, Maldah, Murshidabad, Nadia, 24 Parganas, Medinipur)	3.70	31.13

Table 5 Cultural division of West Bengal *Source:* Compiled by authors

Regional schemes	Regional division	Place	Characteristics
Suniti Kumar Chatterji (1926)	Radha	Middle west of Bengal	Phonetic characteristics: Vowel system is conservative in nature and it is considered as standard colloquial, use of 'ae', turn the 'a' into 'o' (Chatterji, 1926: 142) Social characteristics: Settlements of Brahmins ¹² (from the time of the palas) formed a common intellectual aristocracy. Kayasthas ¹³ were partly the landed aristocracy (Chatterji, 1926: 146)
	Pundra or Varendra	North Bengal	Phonetic characteristics: Here 'a' is a higher sound and tongue tip alveolar affricates are also heard. 'Y' in a consonant nexus brings about epenthesis (Chatterji, 1926: 144) Social characteristics: Settlements of Brahmins (from the time of the palas) and formation of a common intellectual aristocracy (Chatterji, 1926: 146)
	Vanga	East and South-eastern	Phonetic characteristics: Here 'a' is also strongly higher sound, closed 'e' becomes open, 'o' becomes 'u', nasalisation in words is dropped (Chatterji, 1926: 142) Social characteristics: Brahmins in Radha and Varendra later on settled here and established marital and social relation (Chatterji, 1926: 146)
	Kamrupa	North-eastern Bengal	Phonetic characteristics: The original nasalised vowel remains intact; the palatals are pronounced as dental affricates (Chatterji, 1926: 143) Social characteristics: Brahmins later on settled here would create problems. Later on, the self-contained culture was prevailing here (Chatterji, 1926: 147)

Table 5 (continued)

Regional schemes	Regional division	Place	Characteristics
Sukumar Sen (1965)	Radha	Middle west of Bengal	Phonetic characteristics: In pronunciation, the use of 'o,'nasalisation in words is kept (Sen 1965: 136)
	Jharkhandi	South west of Bengal	Phonetic characteristics: Nasalisation in words is kept; use of nominal verb (Nam dhatu) is retained (Sen 1965: 137)
	Pundra or Varendra	North Bengal	Phonetic characteristics: Nasalisation in vowel is observed, use of 'z' instead of j, once it was with Radhi later on, the effects of Bangali/Vanga and Bihari this type have originated (Sen 1965: 137)
	Vanga	East and South-eastern	Phonetic characteristics: Here 'a' becomes 'ae', 'o' becomes 'u', nasalisation in words is dropped (Sen 1965: 137)
	Kama-rupa	North-eastern Bengal	Phonetic characteristics: It is the mixing up of Varendri and Bangali/Vanga, though Varendri and Kamrupi is closer (Sen 1965: 137)
Barrie. M. Morrison (1970)	The Bhagirathi- Hooghly area	Delta region	Politically subordinate and large number of small grants of agricultural land were given to individual Brahmans (Morrison, 1970: 152)
	Varendra	Northern part of delta	A buffer zone between the empires and kingdoms that developed in the Gangetic valley and the kingdoms of the lower Delta; an area where grants were made to individual Brahmans or groups, or to Hindu or Jaina center (Morrison, 1970: 152; Spencer 1971: 225)
	Central Delta	Modern Dacca and Faridpur District	Where the most important political capitals located, and where grants were made to individual Brahmans (Morrison, 1970: 152; Spencer 1971: 225)
	Samatata	Eastern side of Meghna River	It is distinguished in terms of Buddhist and Hindu centres, and groups of Brahmins (Morrison, 1970: 153)

and their spatial connections, which actualize fairs with the essence of its oldest origins, and its parallel growth through generations. Again, modern fairs are exhibited here as ample in number, which contains contemporary events (exhibition fair, job fair, trade fair). The fair mostly establishes its connection with rural life as it is found the greater number in rural areas; on the contrary, the study reveals

that urban fairs are more widely celebrated in recent times. In conclusion, the region of Bengal deserves much greater scholarly attention when it comes to the immense cultural contributions of the myriad fairs held there. In its exposition of the geographical distribution, rich typology and the immense ethnic and socio-cultural importance of fairs in West Bengal, lies the valued contribution of this study.

Table 6 Cultural regions and fair distribution *Source:* Compiled by authors

Cultural region	Scholars	Fairs		
		Spatial distribution	Temporal distribution	Urban–Rural distribution
Radhi or Radha or Bhagirathi Hooghly area	Sukumar Sen (1965), Suniti Kumar Chatterji (1970), Morrison (1970)	Local deity fairs, commemorative fairs, others religious fairs associated with festival/ puja, trade and exhibition fairs	Both traditional and modern fairs found substantially	Urban fairs are found substantially in comparison to others regions
Barendra or Varendri	Sukumar Sen (1965), Suniti Kumar Chatterji (1970), Morrison (1970)	Dip fairs, risky ritual fairs, art fairs, local deity fairs	Both traditional and modern fairs are found substantially	Rural fairs are more evident here
Kamrupi or Kamrup	Sukumar Sen (1965), Suniti Kumar Chatterji (1970), Morrison (1970)	Dip fairs, local deity fairs, trade and exhibition fairs	Modern fairs are higher than traditional fairs	Rural fairs are more evident here
Jharkhandi	Sukumar Sen (1965)	Dip fairs, risky rituals fair, ethnic rituals fair, commemorative fairs, chariot fairs, local deities fair. Other religious fairs associated with festival/ puja	Both traditional and modern fairs are found substantially	Rural fairs are more visible; urban fairs are a smaller in number

Acknowledgements We are very much thankful to Kanchan Mukhopadhyay, former Tagore National Fellow, Anthropological Survey of India for his valuable suggestions and encouragement.

Author contributions All authors are contributed equally to do this research and they are completely agree with this submission.

Funding No funding was collected during this research.

Declarations

Conflict of interest All authors attest that they are not connected to or a part of any group or organisation that has a financial or non-financial stake in the topics or materials included in this text. There are no proprietary or financial interests held by the writers in any of the topics covered in this article.

Human and animal rights No humans or animals were harmed in the conduct of this research and there is no possibility of any in the near future.

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