

# PEOPLE, FESTIVAL AND CULTURE: A STUDY ON JANGAL MAHAL OF WEST BENGAL

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**Abstract:** Jangal Mahal of West Bengal is comprised of three districts, namely Paschim Medinipur, Bankura and Purulia. These three districts bear some special character compared to plains of Bengal. Among inhabitants SCs and STs are dominant. A special sub caste, Kurmi Kshatriyas are there also. Their festivals are different, their culture is also different. Apparently they are resting in a situation that may be regarded as anachronistic. Still they are extracting pleasure from their impoverishment. In this study I have tried to focus light on the speciality of the region.

**Index terms:** Jangal Mahal, Demography, Culture, Anachronistic

## I. Introduction

Three districts of present West Bengal, Paschim Medinipur, Bankura and Purulia are unitedly named as Jangal Mahal. Once, during British rule there was a district, Jungle Terry and then Junglemahal or simply Mahal. At that time it was a larger district, comprised of parts of present Bihar, Orissa, Birbhum and Burdwan. Historically the area has been isolated from mainstream Bengal.

Jangal Mahal is a region where classes other than general caste have seen domination among the residents. Among them tribes and Mahatos inherit values that are different compared to other castes of the state. These groups as far as possible have protected their age old culture. Since the ages of Aryan invasion Santals, Kol, Bhil, Mundas and other tribal groups had to shift repeatedly from one place to another to maintain their cultural sanctity. They had always tried to be more attached to forests, maintain a self-sufficient but mostly stagnant village economy and not to be governed by others.

## II. Population and Sample

To identify the cultural characters of residents of Jangal Mahal, a survey had been conducted by the present researcher. Inhabitants residing in three districts of Jangal Mahal are the population of survey. It was conducted over 300 families across the said three districts. So sample size is 300. 100 sample households are chosen randomly from each of the three districts.

Objective of the study is to

- Identification of demographic feature of inhabitants.
- Listing of popular local festivals and studying their character.
- Comparing cultural features of Jangal Mahal and rest of Bengal

## III. Methodology

Using chosen samples, census data and response from the villagers, some of the features of the area has been tried to be identified. Questions were framed in a manner to highlight festivities and cultural features of inhabitants. Simple graphical analysis is carried here. Features have been shown under few headings like demography and culture, festivals of Jangal Mahal, other deities worshiped in Jangal Mahal and Comparing culture of Jangal Mahal with that of Urban areas.

## IV. Demography and Culture

The way of living of any community is highly influenced by the ideas of great men of their community. Exemplification of great men can bring radical changes in living of their followers. Trying to follow the ideologies of these great people common man consciously or unconsciously change their ways of looking to the society. Inhabitants of Jangal Mahal are no exception. However, the so called civilised urban society never tried to understand the area or its residents.

During Middle Ages and before the emergence of British, kings or the associates considered the region as a land of savages. Residents were thought of as wild. Occasionally it was used as the game fields. Otherwise, this forest covered region was grossly avoided by outsiders. Emergence of British brought about one change. They felt the need of wood. So the area got importance, at least, as a supplier of timber. But intervention by this form was not accepted gladly by local residents. Their rejection was reflected in series of revolts against rulers.

Since 1774, there were around 55 severe tribal revolts against the ‘dikus’ or outsiders until India got its independence. During this long span leaders of rebellion like Tilka Majhi, Birsa Munda, Sidhu, Kanhu, Chand Murmu, Bhairab Murmu and many more influenced lives of people of the region. Now-a-days however growing cultural infiltration from outside through media, gadgets etc. has been creating a problem of ‘cultural lag’<sup>1</sup> within their community.

Culture of any community is reflected in their everyday activities, composition of family, degree of tie with their relatives, celebration of festivals, nature of worship and on many other things.

Jangal Mahal is not a home of a particular community. In the first instance the broad caste categories comprising of General, Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) differs in three districts of Jangal Mahal. Percentage of general caste including Other Backward Castes (OBC) is naturally higher in these three districts. Among them the district of Paschim Medinipur possesses highest number of General castes including OBC. With respect to Scheduled caste population Paschim Medinipur and Purulia possesses relatively equal number of population (19%) out of their respective total population. In the district of Bankura however relatively far more (33%) population belonging to Scheduled Caste is residing.

Relative to the respective district population the district of Purulia is found to be with highest number of Scheduled Tribe population (18%). Relatively the least number of S T resides at Bankura.

Apart from proportional categorical difference of population across these three districts sub castes within each category also differs considerably. For example In Bankura we get a considerable number of populations belonging to ‘Bauri’ and ‘Lohar’ sub caste within the Scheduled Caste category. These sub castes are almost inexistent in Paschim Medinipur. On the other hand within S C category ‘Keot’ and ‘Dhoba’ are found to be much frequent in Paschim Medinipur but these are infrequently found in Bankura.

With such variety among the residents culture of each district of

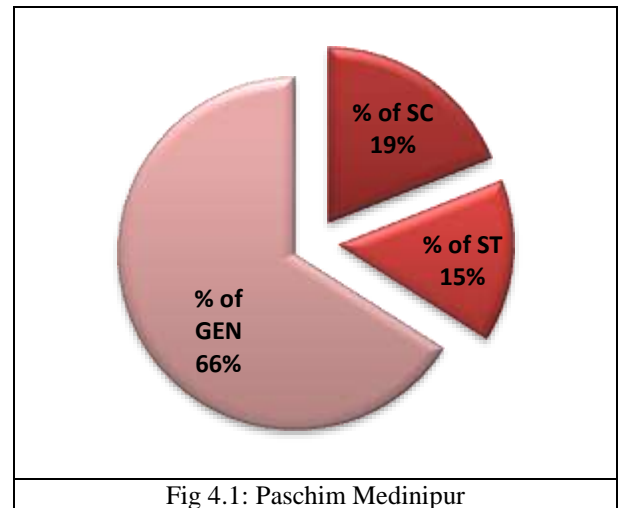


Fig 4.1: Paschim Medinipur

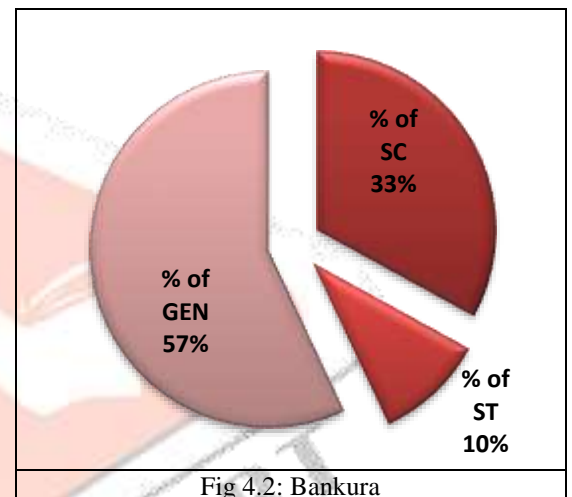


Fig 4.2: Bankura

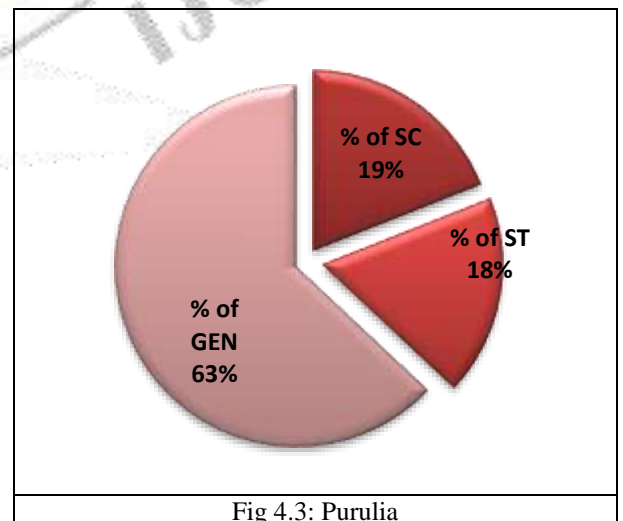


Fig 4.3: Purulia

<sup>1</sup> According to W. F. Ogburn culture is classified as Material culture (reading materials, utensils, machine and tools, house etc.) and Non material culture (belief, attitudes, values, norms, religion, education etc.). It is the material culture that changes first and non-material culture takes time to adjust to such changes. In any particular time the gap between the latter from the former is known as cultural lag

Jangal Mahal differs naturally.

Urban middle class belonging to different category of west Bengal exhibits more or less homogeneous culture. This culture is a mixture of Indian and western culture. Influence of western culture is increasing with the persuasion of liberalisation. Today urban areas of west Bengal has lost their age old cultural identity. Nowadays urban folks pursue some sort of hybrid culture. They celebrate festivals of other regions along with their own. Number of deities worshiped by any particular community is increasing day by day. Food habits have taken a cosmopolitan trend.

## V. Festivals of Jangal Mahal

Social festivals or community festivals play a great role in developing the process of socialisation. Social network also strengthens with social cohesion among community members during festivals. Villagers of rural parts of Jangal Mahal suffer a lot from lack of amusement. Amusements help to bring in colours and contrast in their regular daily life. Social festivals help villagers to make them relieved from being bored. It also creates opportunities for new avenues of development. If the area is additionally well endowed with natural resources, visitation of outsiders may increase with frequent occurrence of social festivals. Gradually scope of nature based tourism may increase in the area. There is however possibilities of future dangers associated with such change. For instance overcrowding, vehicle congestion, behavioural degradation may be introduced in the concerned society.

Considering the above notes it may be inferred that festivals of Jangal Mahal may indirectly induce possible future change of the region. We don't know whether such change would be good or bad for the time being let us in brief take a look at the local festivals of Jangal Mahal.

### 5.1: Tusu Parab

On the day of Makar Sankranti, Tusu parab is celebrated. Mainly Kurmi community celebrates this festival in Jangal Mahal. It's a very colourful festival. Idol of Tusumoni is prepared every year and is dressed in vibrant colours. Dance, folk music and gur pitha (a kind of sweet cutlet) are integral parts of this festival. It's generally a two days festival. Though the genesis might have been different, now Kurmi community considers the festival as a festival of prosperity.

According to local folklores three different stories are heard as the basis and initiation of Tusu Parab. First, a prince marries a beautiful lad, named Tusumani. Tusumani was daughter of a poor potter. The Prince died at an early age. Out of deep sorrow with the incidence, Tusumani jumped into the pyre and committed suicide. Since then people are memorising the sad incidence by observing Tusu parab.

Secondly, a story is there which says that a king was passionately wanted to marry a village lad, named, Tusumani. But the king could not marry her because of her early death. The agony made the king as being virtually mad. To relieve the king villagers made a statue of Tusumani and kept it near the king's palace. The idol of Tusumani is made since then, every year and festival is observed with grandeur.

A third story says that a Mughal King wanted to marry a potter's daughter, named, Tusumani but when her father refused to get his daughter married to the king, the king started torturing the villagers. To help the villagers, Tusumani ultimately committed suicide and since then is worshipped for her sacrifice.

Whatever be the story, Tusumani has become a legend.<sup>2</sup>

Tusu parab, like other aborigine festivals, is also linked to the harvest season. During the harvest season, a small amount of crop is left untouched in the fields. This untouched crop is known as 'Dilli Budhi' and is cut when Aghran Sankranti starts in mid December.

### 5.2: Bhadu

Bhadu is the social festival of Jangal Mahal. The festival starts from the first day of Bengali 5<sup>th</sup> month, Bhadro, and continues till the end of the month.

It has its origins in the story of a princess called Bhadravati (Bhadresvari, in some version) of Panchakote dynasty who committed suicide. Bhadravati's devotees made an image of her and sing and dance before it throughout the month. On the last day of Bhadra, they gather on the river bank and immerse the image in the water. Songs, mainly focussing on marriage, form the main

<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia & local people (Ramchandra Mahata of Faniyamara)

attraction of the festival in which both professional groups and amateurs take part. Celebrations include fairs and cultural programmes.<sup>3</sup>

### 5.3: Karam

Karam or Karma is one of the most popular festivals of Jharkhand and Paschim Medinipur. This festival falls in the month of August/September (11<sup>th</sup> moon of the Hindu month of Bhadra). Apart from western districts of our state tribes of other Indian states also celebrate Karam. It is a festival celebrated by mainly the Oraon, Baiga, Binjhari and Majhwar tribes of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh among others.

The name Karma is drawn from the name of a tree “Karam”. The branch of the Karam tree is carried by the Karma dancers and is passed among them with singing and dancing. This branch is washed with milk and rice beer locally known as Handia. Then it is raised in the middle of the dancing arena. All worshipers dance for whole night in the praise of the “Karam”. The ritual starts with the planting of the trees. The dancers form a circle and dance with their arms around each other dancer’s waists.

On this day people go in the forest to collect fruits and flowers, and they worship Karma Devi, a goddess who is represented with a branch of karam tree. The branches are garlanded on the next day. Offerings of flowers, rice and curd are made to them. Red coloured baskets filled with grains are placed before the branches. Barley seedlings are distributed among the young people, who wear it on their heads. The branches are worshiped and their blessings sought. As per the legends of Karma Devi, she is believed to be the goddess of wealth and children.<sup>4</sup>

### 5.4: Badhna

The most popular & joyful days of southern-western Bengal is Bandhna Parab among Santals, Kurmi (MAHTO), Bhumij, Korha, Munda etc. communities. Bandhna parab mainly celebrated on the day of Amabasya (DIWALI) of Bengali Kartik month. The people enjoy the festive with various types of rituals. On that night a group of young men go from house to house to awaken cows and the peoples. They mainly visit all the cow-shades of the villages. They sing whole night this type of traditional Bandhna Geet with Dhamsa, Dhol, Bansi, Jhumka, Madol etc. musical instruments.<sup>5</sup>

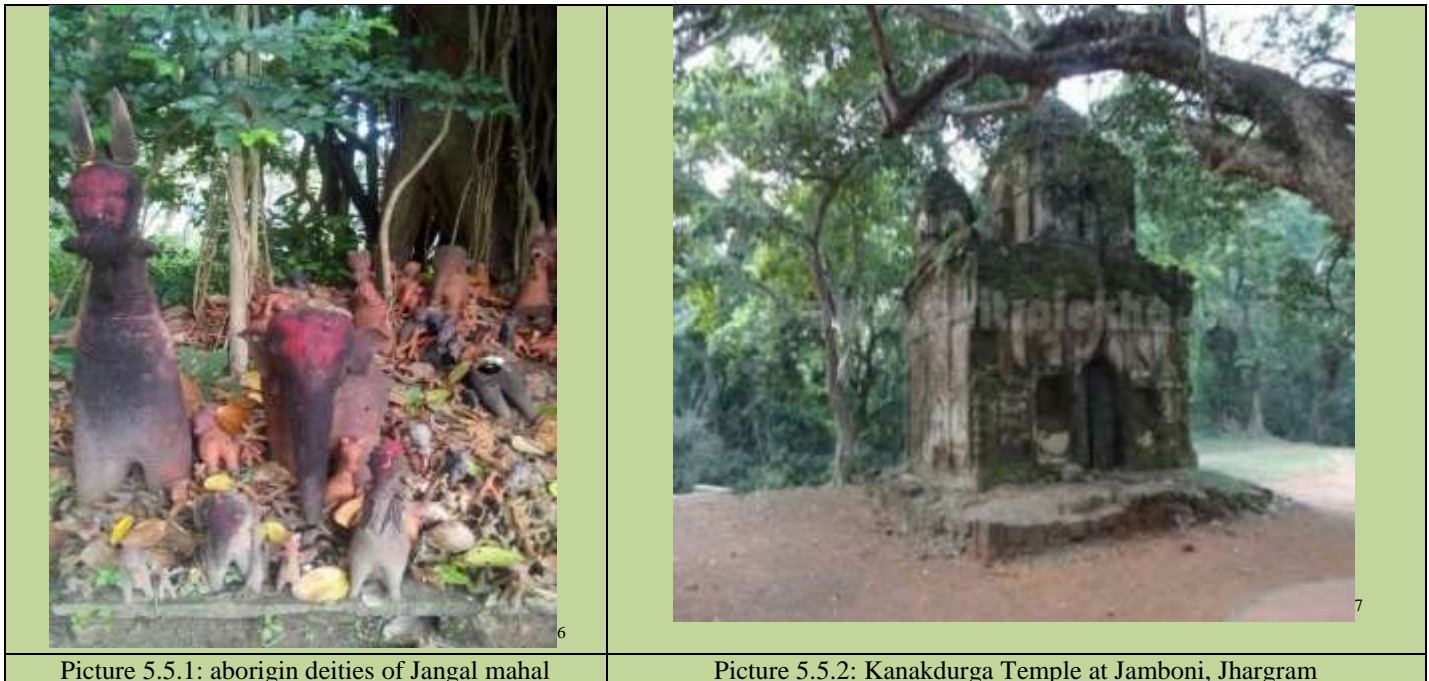
### 5.5: Other deities worshiped in Jangal Mahal

<sup>3</sup> Wikipedia & local people (Naresh Mudi of Kadma)

<sup>4</sup> Wikipedia & Ramchandra Mahata of Faniyamara

<sup>5</sup> wikipedia

There are many other religious festivals of Jangal Mahal. Villagers worship Manasa, Dharam Thakur, Indra and many other aborigine deities. These deities are by no means Sanskritised deities. They are worshipped by aborigines and are not culminated from Vedas or



Picture 5.5.1: aborigin deities of Jangal mahal

Picture 5.5.2: Kanakdurga Temple at Jamboni, Jhargram

Puranas. Sometimes inhabitants are found to mould traditional deities into modern one. To increase reputation among the worshippers local aborigine deities are transformed into Sanskritised deity as variety of goddess Durga. For example the original deity of Jamboni rajbari was 'Rankini', an aborigine deity. Later she was transformed into 'Kanak Durga', a Sanskritised deity.

It is apparent that most of the deities worshipped by the people of Jangal Mahal have some connection with nature. Either it is associated with trees or forest animal or over all nature. They pray for rain, pray to protect themselves from snake biting, Marangburu is prayed to protect them from all diabolical attempts and so on. It seems that the tradition of fear and love towards nature from the pre historic age still are found to exist in these rural parts. If scientific and technical development of the country is taken into account then such fear or dependence towards nature is seemed to be absurd. But it would not be felt absurd if we mingle ourselves with shady tree surrounded mystic environment of Jangal Mahal. It would be felt natural to surrender before nature and natural deities.

## VI. Comparing culture of Jangal Mahal with that of Urban areas

Unlike urban parts remote areas of Jangal Mahal are still showing some degree of cultural sanctity or purity. This purity might have been out of conscious effort of inhabitants or due to lack of sufficient communication between remote and urban areas. As we have discussed earlier that inhabitants of Jangal Mahal differs significantly at least with respect to their belonging in different sub castes. Members of each sub castes inherit their own different cultural histories and traditions. The tradition and history has formed difference in religious customs, dialects, engagement into social festivals, etc. Social mixing over long years however helps to brings in some sort of equality in the cultural level of different communities. Ignoring the existence of few towns Jangal Mahal may predominantly be described as rural. As seen from the latest census report that 90% of population of these three districts reside in rural areas, whereas in west Bengal 72% resides in rural areas. Remoteness of rural parts of Jangal Mahal has helped to impede emergence of some of the cultural vices like nucleus family structure, self centeredness of people of urban areas. However in villages too with the ever growing influence of cable TV and mobile phones food habits, liking of dresses and styles of younger generation is rapidly changing. This change out of demonstration effect has been much more influential in town-adjacent villages. Nowadays it has become quite difficult to identify any village clad by mere looking. This is more apparent in comparatively developed districts of the state. Villages are rapidly changing with the growing demand for urbanisation and pure villages are appeared to be transforming itself into urbanised villages. Particularly, younger generation is feeling less attachment to their age old family traditions as well as to land based economic activities. This seems to be a good sign until sufficient opportunities are emerged in urban sector for this land-apathy newly emerging class. But if urban area fails to generate sufficient opportunities we would face the danger of losing both agriculture as well as non agricultural income in near future.

<sup>6</sup> Picture snapped by researcher

<sup>7</sup> Google image

Remote villages of Jangal Mahal is however still manages to maintain their age old traditions. The survey conducted in the area has tried to focus on few issues related to the cultural level of the inhabitants. Focus, in particular, has been concentrated on participation in religious festivals, specification of such festivals, engagement of younger members in the festivals, relation with the relatives, communication level between surveyed household and their relatives etc. Let us now look at the findings of the survey.

- It is found that the practice of celebrating religious festivals is universal in the area. All the respondents participate in such festivals. In this respect unlike other urbanised villages it is seen that villagers are more interested in observing and celebrating pujas of local deities. Along with Durga puja or Kali puja they celebrate Tusu, Bhadu, Manasa or Karam with much more affection.

In urban areas most of the occasions there occurs unrestricted superficial social mixing among communities. For example, in urban areas family based worship of any particular deity has been transformed today into 'Barowari Puja'. Few family traditions are left where worshipping of any deity is confined within any particular family members. Irrespective of sub castes Hindus participate in all the religious festivals. In cosmopolitan towns where people belonging to various communities reside, people of other religion participate in Hindu festivals. Similarly Hindus celebrate Christmas Eve or are invited in Iftar party of Muslims. Its reflection is seen in the food plates of different communities. Urban Hindus are mostly affected due to this cultural mixing. People belonging to other communities generally have well guided religious prescriptions to be followed by the believers. This impedes them to adopt others' culture after a certain limit. Muslims adopt others' until that do not contradicts with inscriptions of Quran. Social behaviour of Christians is largely influenced by new testaments. But Hindus have innumerable religious prescriptions inscribed in Beda, Epics, Puranas, Mangal kabyos, etc. There is no well defined list of customs to be followed during social mixing. Moreover, different versions of them contain significant difference in opinions. As a consequence no uniformity is seen in the social behaviour of Hindus.

- As we have told earlier that it is quite natural to experience existence of cultural lag between old and young generation of a community. Younger generation uses to accept new customs and beliefs that others are following. That is why cultural differences among various communities tend to reduce as time passes. Younger members tend to align more towards universal festivals that others also celebrate and avoid traditional festivals of their own community. This tendency is strengthened with increasing mixing among communities. During survey in remote villages of Jangal Mahal it is however seen that younger members of most of the families still very much enjoy their age old festivals. During survey some young members of tribal families however have shown their growing interest on festivals like Durgapuja, Kalipuja and like others for their grandeur. Moreover it is strangely seen that tribal families of several villages of Gopiballavpur worship goddess Lakshmi regularly. These are however stray incidences. In my observation cultural bondage between old and young ones is still much higher in Jangal Mahal compared to other urbanised world.

## VII. Conclusion:

With all its ethnic character villages of Jangal Mahal exists. Inhabitants enjoy rural living. To examine villagers' views about their opinion towards rural living, few questions are asked to them. Around 93% of households responded positively about their affection towards rural living. In other parts of Bengal trend of growing urbanisation indicate that a section of villagers are increasingly shifting to neighbouring towns. But in this part this trend is less prominent. In the adjacent table we can see that most of the households who love to reside in villages preferring it as because their ancestors used to do so. That is they are assigning most importance to what their

ancestors did. Apart from that the simple village living has also been given significant importance by them. Among other factors they also fear from lack of opportunity elsewhere by choosing the option 'nowhere to go'.

It seems from responses of villagers that they are satisfied with their present status and are reluctant to choose urbanised life. It cannot be denied that rural living in those distant rural pockets must be

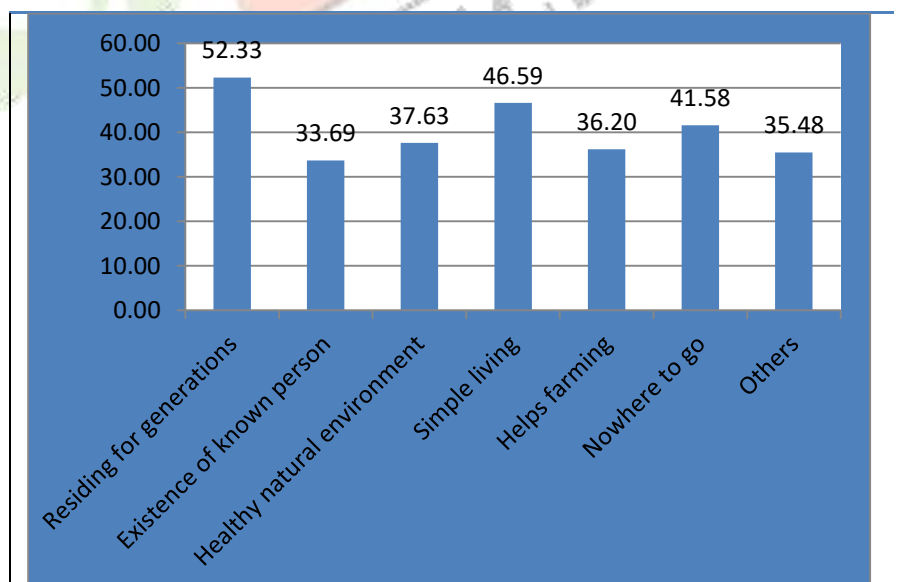


Fig 7.1: Percentage distribution of causes behind preferring rural living

Source: survey data

accompanied with various kinds of material lacking. But still they opt for that only because of their attitude to avoid urbanised culture and to alienate themselves into an anachronistic world.

#### VIII. Acknowledgement

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