

Cultural Daily

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Kans Phool — A Tale of Culture and Climate Change

Pitamber Kaushik · Tuesday, September 6th, 2022

As with most traditional Indian festivals, there's no fixed date on the Gregorian Calendar for the celebration of *Pujo*, i.e. *Durga Puja*, a ten-day festive observance in reverence of Goddess Durga and an especially important cultural phenomenon in the Indian state of West Bengal. The date and even the time of its commencement as well as its span are subject to the interplay between solar and lunar cycles. It starts on a fixed date on the Hindu lunisolar calendar which seldom concurs with the previous dates on our modern calendar, year after year.

Needless to say, this peculiarity used to cause a lot of bewilderment with our childhood enthusiasm and excitement for the festival. We had something to look forward to but lacked a coherent roadmap leading up to it, no funnel to channel our anticipation through.



A clump of Kans Grass beside a highway in Bokaro, India. Picture by Pitamber Kaushik

Fortunately, we had an omen that we could count on, an unfaltering harbinger of the festival, whose ephemeral but unfailing appearance each year marked the onset of the auspicious days.

‘Kans phool’ or ‘Kans grass’ (*Saccharum spontaneum*) booms explosively around the same time each year, marking the end of the rains and the onset of autumn. Its primary habitat stretching all the way from Himalayan foothills in Nepal and Assam to the plateaus of Chhattisgarh and Odisha,

Kans (pronounced K??s/K?s/K??) grass rapidly colonizes the flooded and subsequently exposed silt plains left behind by the retreating monsoon. It blooms spontaneously in the wake of the monsoon showers, and spreads seemingly invasively, lending it its specific name *spontaneum*. Clusters of the slender grass, a relative of sugarcane, that grows up to three-metres tall, patch the landscape in Eastern India, their fibrous, feathery white tops swaying in the wind in unison, creating an illusion of shimmering clumps of snow. It's as if they wave adieu to the rains and welcome the winter. Of course the grass is in no way perceptive of the disparity between the two calendars, but having something to hold on to — something alive and dynamic always made the festival worth the wait.

It was sheer magic to see entire fields and pastures transformed overnight with the explosive bloom as if a festive spell had been cast on the entire landscape — nature and culture in tandem. The grass transformed, spread as Puja drew nearer, reducing the vagueness of time and adding an element of progression and proliferation. Plus, viewing the vegetation in the idyllic countryside served as an end in itself. Back then the other surrounding rhythms of the seasons seemed to agree too — the skies, winds, birds, and rains all complied to the change, almost in chorus. My grandmother retained fragments of a long-running, rich oral tradition that accurately associated the appearances of everything from butterflies to migratory birds and bug chirps to floral blooms with the change of the season. Most Indian festivals are rooted in natural phenomena in some or the other way. Their timing coincides with delicately-balanced and meticulously-observed natural cycles.



Array of Kans Grass in Bokaro, India. Picture by Pitamber Kaushik

The full-bloom of the Kans plant served as a sort of alarm clock, a festive herald. It signified a time of contentment and jubilation. But it wasn't long before all this changed and Kans sightings started to mean little to us, as their growth cycles would now betray the season, blooming too soon, a couple months at times, and going away too early, often in an erratic and inconsistent fashion even in the same region. The tether was severed —the motif was no longer linked to its chronological peg. It was as if someone had dismasted our traditional flag.

It's heartbreaking considering how close the plant is to the land's identity and rustic aesthetic from Nepal to Odisha and Jharkhand to Assam through Bengal, featuring prominently in literature and

films of the region. It was no wonder given how the weather cycles were all palpably disrupted thanks to climate change — our rains were distributed wider over the year while heat waves would protract the summer. Yet, often I would find another of my travel companions, friends or family, remarking and lamenting on the very same observation with dismay. The balance of nature's mechanisms is delicate, as an intricate clockwork, phenomena work in tandem in dynamic, harmonic equilibrium. Moving one piece too much throws the entire system into hard-to-reverse chaos, in a domino effect, akin to the collapse of a Rube Goldberg machine. Various phenomena are interlinked in an underlying matrix which may not always be superficially obvious. Disruptive human actions not only take away our natural heritage but also chip away at our cultural heritage, as the two are intimately linked and inalienable, for all our human-made aesthetics trace their ultimate origin to keen, mindful, and fastidious observation and appreciation of natural rhythms and phenomena.



A scene from Satyajit Ray's acclaimed 1955 Bengali-language film *Pather Panchali* | YouTube Screengrab

The impacts of climate change on our civilization are as pervasive and multidimensional as itself. Take for instance the fact that it is getting increasingly difficult to find suitable venues for organizing Winter Olympics as one has to inch further Northward to find an assured standard level of snow. The Games are predicted to be forced to shift to more boreal latitudes in the coming decades. It is becoming tough for a number of places to find snow and decorative vegetation associated with Christmas on its eve. Similarly, many ritualistic festivals are struggling to keep up with traditions because the corresponding natural items — flora, fauna, geographical phenomena, and favourable weather conditions are becoming inaccessible, erratic, or rare. There's a mismatch between yester-centuries' prescriptions and modern day occurrences. Elements of our surroundings, both objects and processes, that are mentioned in traditional codes, scriptures, and

ritual texts are often hard to come by in today's world.

Further, traditional crafts and arts are dying as practitioners are unable to find the requisite materials — the right fibres and clays, natural mineral and plant pigments, and season-dependent consistent processing to practice their craft. Gone are the days when Holi colours were authentically made from the Palash flower; umpteen pigments sourced from the wild were used to create ornamental patterns adorning houses on Diwali, and the dye extract of a certain wild berry was used to paint auspicious symbols on walls on important ceremonial occasions. Much of our traditional wisdom and folk knowledge now stands for naught, thanks in part to climate change. Look for an herbal ingredient for a concoction described in an old Ayurvedic Treatise and it is nowhere to be found at the time in the region when and where it was supposed to, according to the text. Scout for a bird that used to be the unerring, veristic harbinger and signifier of a seasonal onset and you shall only have surveyed the town's pigeons and counted the crows. Be prepared to be surprised with the sound of a much-romanticized monsoon songbird in the early Summer. Brace yourself to be taken aback by cricket sounds in Spring or be entertained to an unsolicited frog symphony encore in November. Update your *sajiki* (a compendium of *kigo*), for the obscure *kigos* (season-words) of Haikus from the '90s do not make sense any more let alone references to flowers in Victorian-age novels that are nowhere in sight. The plants which are the subject of these natural imagery and metaphors are only to be found in the pages of books. Comfortably encounter wildflower weeds from your subtropical hometown at your Himalayan Foothills homestay ? how convenient to have the warm company of your regular companions from the plains with you in the cold, lonely, lofty ascent of the pristine wilderness! Expect a regular *kamal* (lotus) in place of the *Brahma-kamal* (divine-lotus), for Brahma, the deity of creation has likely fled to higher heavens, escaping the sweltering, snow-melting heat.

Climate change is taking away our classical motifs, metaphors, icons, and symbols and making our culture tough to relate to and resonate with. Environmental alterations are decreasing our accessibility to our heritage and increasing the disparity and dissonance between the past and the present, alienating us from our roots. The desire to retain the authenticity of our connection with our civilizational heritage, our artistic traditions, and ultimately our ancestors who reconciled society with nature, should serve as yet another motivator to preserve the environment in its pristine, original state, and strike a balance between development and preservation. The environment should thus not be seen as distinct from culture, but rather as the first and primary culture of our universal home. Environment and Habitat Preservation is integral to maintaining cultural sanctity. Only when we see cultural heritage as one with natural heritage, can we hope to preserve either.

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