

Original article

## **OCCUPATIONAL SHIFT AND RECONSTRUCTION OF GENDERED SPACE: AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION AT SALTGHERI VILLAGE IN MOUSUNI ISLAND IN SOUTH 24 PARGANAS OF WEST BENGAL**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Gendered spaces are particular locales where cultures invest with gendered meanings, sites in which sex-differentiated practices occur, or settings that are used strategically to inform identity and produce and reproduce asymmetrical gender relations to power and authority. The present study is empirical, representing the construction of gendered space as an outcome of an occupational shift of a community settled at Saltgheri village in Mousuni Island in South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal in India. First-hand anthropological fieldwork methods and techniques, including Schedule, Questionnaire, observation, case studies, and interviews, have been used to meet the objectives of the study. The study shows how changes in subsistence patterns historically restructured the gendered spaces in the studied community.

**Key words:** Gender, Space, Occupational Shift, Environment

### **INTRODUCTION**

The concept of "space" is multifaceted and, much like culture, it cannot be fully conceptualized through a singular analytical framework (Guha, 2014). It emerged as a critical tool for understanding cultural theories in the 1970s, and along with the contributions of several eminent scholar's new spectrums were introduced in the 1990s and thereafter (Guha, 2014). Scholars like Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and Henri Lefebvre laid the founding stone in spatial theories. Foucault idealized space as a blend of material and ideological construction and used this blend to understand the constitution and "operation of power." Bourdieu presented his idea of space as a "field of power" where individuals or groups occupy relative

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positions in which difference is symbolically enunciated by the deployment of social, cultural, symbolic, and economic capital (Bourdieu 1997, 1986, 1998). In spatial discourse, Lefebvre (1991) focused on the "production of space." For him, "The form of Social space is an encounter, assembly, simultaneity. But assembles or what is assembled? The answer is: everything that is there in space, everything that is produced either by nature or by society, either through their cooperation or their conflicts. Everything: living beings, things, objects, works, signs, and symbols." (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 31-33). Similarly, Massey (1994) argues that "social space is not a pre-given container in which things happen, but itself a product of social relations." Conceptualizing the statements of the scholars as mentioned above, it becomes apparent that space serves as the medium where culture is produced in terms of social relations.

In their classic publication "Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture" (2003), Low and Zuniga classified the domain of spatial studies into six core thematic categories, comprising of embodied space, gendered space, inscribed space, contested space, transnational space, and spatial tactics.

The central theme of the present study is the concept of gendered space as it forms the core argument of the research.

The term "gendered space" encompasses the various ways in which space, in all its forms such as physical, discursive, metaphorical, and abstract, is shaped by and contributes to established gender norms and relationships. Similar to other social interactions, gender is a phenomenon that exists within a spatial context and is manifested through actions that either reinforce or challenge prevailing norms and relationships. As the understanding of gender evolves across different periods and locations, investigating the spatial aspects related to gender provides a valuable perspective on how gender categories are defined, expressed, and assigned specific attributes and significance. Consequently, the gendering of space has tangible implications for individuals' daily experiences, their freedom of movement, and their sense of self (Myrdahl, 2019).

In her renowned work "Gendered Spaces: A Spatial Perspective to Women's Fear of Violence and Smart Cities Rhetoric" (2022), Anushka delves into the gendered nature of public spaces,

revealing how men enjoy unrestricted access throughout the day while women's presence is constantly questioned and scrutinized. She also argued how city planning and public services contribute to the violence and intimidation experienced by urban women, particularly due to inadequate transportation options and insufficient street lighting, which heighten their vulnerability. Daphne Spain (1993), in her article, argued that gender segregation in homes, schools, and workplaces hinders women's opportunities to acquire socially valued knowledge, thus perpetuating gender inequality. Salma Nasser and Rasha Hassan (2022) explored the impact of sexual and gender-based violence on the accessibility of public spaces for women and girls in two impoverished neighborhoods of Greater Cairo. Their study also revealed that there are notable disparities in the patterns of access to public spaces between males and females. Junita and Kapadia (2021) in their study explored the gendered nature of public spaces in Bangalore, highlighting the architectural designs and facilities that cater to specific genders while often overlooking the needs of under-represented genders. Perna Siwach (2020) in her research article discussed how gender roles defined by a patriarchal society help in sustaining gender stratification on the physical space. Mandal and Guha (2021) in their article mentioned how occupational shifts in Saltgheri village influenced the manifestation of inscribed space.

The present study is an empirical one, representing the alteration of gendered space as an outcome of an occupational shift of a community settled at Saltgheri village in Mousuni Island in South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal in India.

The study seeks to meet the following objectives:

1. To observe the manifestation of gendered spaces in the studied setting.
2. To observe the location of gendered space in both economic and non-economic particularly social-cultural domain.
3. To understand the how the changes in subsistence pattern altered the characters of gendered space in the studied setting.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The present study is an outcome of the first-hand anthropological fieldwork conducted from 10th May 2019 to 15th July over a period of forty-seven days. The research presented is an outcome of the doctoral thesis of the 1st author. The Indian Council of Social Science Research in New Delhi has generously provided funding for this study.

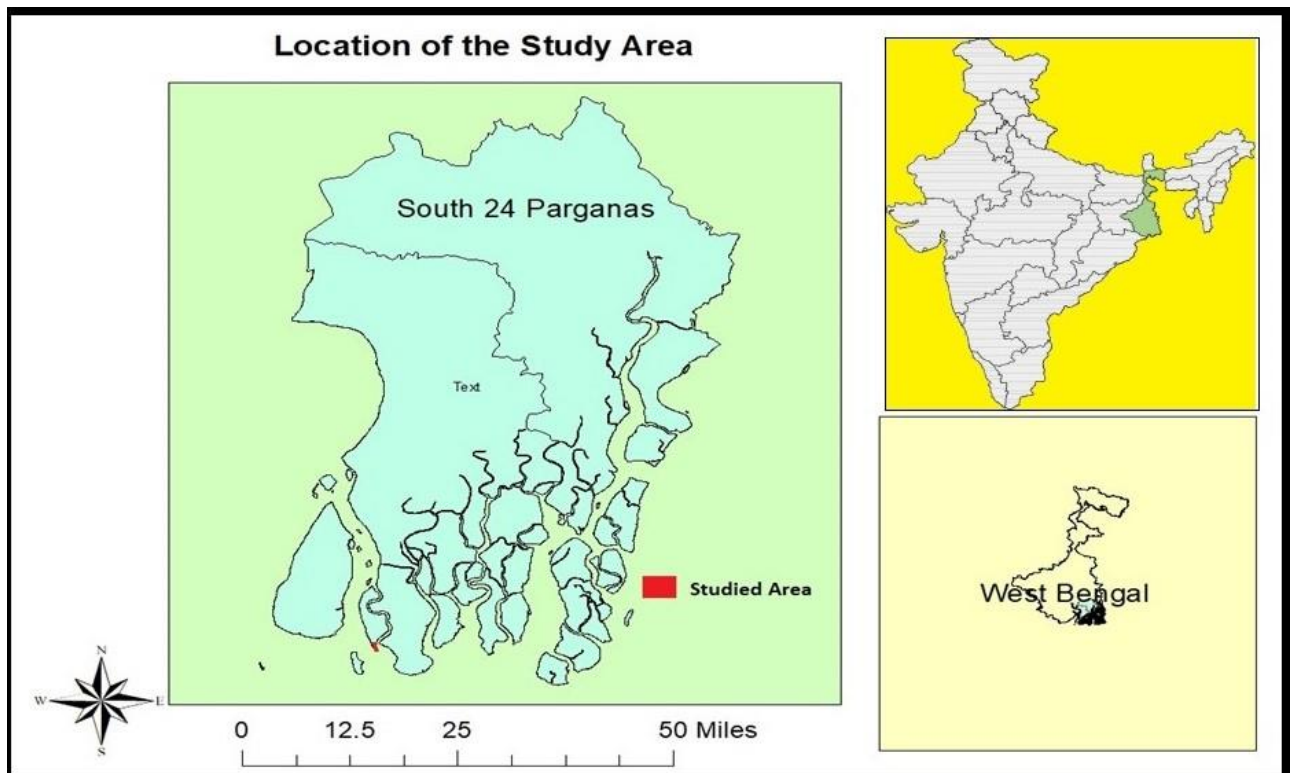
Specialized techniques of data collection namely observation, interview, questionnaire and schedule have been used for data collection. Several cases have been gathered from a selection of purposefully chosen informants to fulfil the objectives of the study. This will aid in our understanding and interpretation of the relationship between humans and the space they inhabit. Qualitative methods of data analysis have been predominantly used through discourse and narratives to interpret the characters of gendered space and its utilization within the studied locale. Semiotic analysis and visual semiotics have been used to symbolically represent the processes of social-cultural changes.

The research was carried out within the community residing in Saltgheri Village on Mousuni Island, located in the South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal. This village has a long-standing tradition of primarily engaging in fishing activities. The study has been conducted among 532 people among them 271 were male and 261 were female. In order to achieve the mentioned objectives, we have collected pertinent data within a diachronic framework. This approach allowed us to examine the overall cultural history of the setting and, specifically, changes in occupations. The collected data reveal the interconnection between the changes in gendered space and occupational shifts throughout the years.

### **THE EMPIRICAL SETTING:**

Saltgheri is a culturally diverse village located along the coastal region of the Bay of Bengal. To its east, the village is bordered by the "Chinai" river, while Kusumtala Village lies to the north. The vast expanse of the Bay of Bengal surrounds Saltgheri to the west and south. Within this village, a harmonious coexistence is observed between both Hindu and Muslim communities as they adapt to the unique marine environment that characterizes their surroundings.

Figure 1 : Physical Location of the Studied Area (Saltgheri Village). (Source: ArcGIS 10.5)

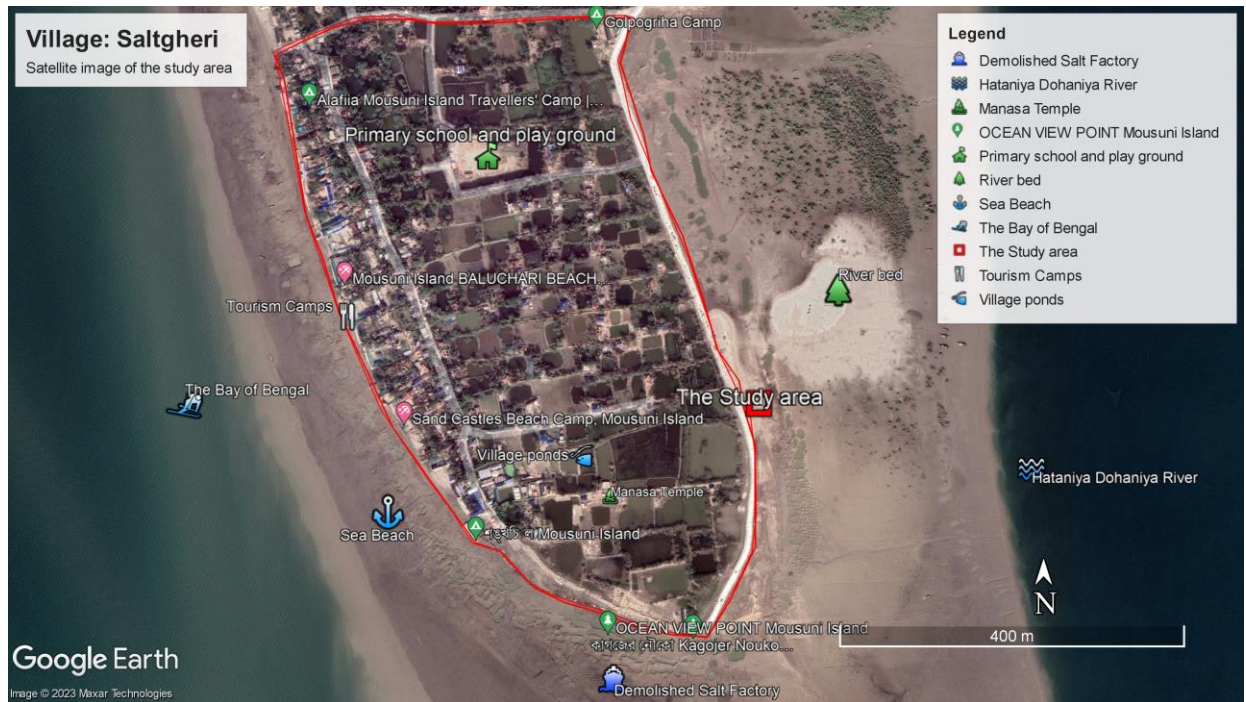


For many years, the majority of the villagers have been involved in fishing, but recently, a growing number of them have begun transitioning towards entrepreneurship and various roles within the local tourism industry, ranging from owners to casual labourers. Additionally, some villagers are now finding employment as daily labourers on construction sites and in agricultural fields.

### **Historical Background of Occupational Shift**

In this study, we have reconstructed the cultural history of the village known as 'Saltgheri' by gathering local narratives from long-standing residents who have lived in this community for over half a century or even longer. Historically, the villagers primarily relied on agriculture, animal husbandry, and small-scale fishing to sustain their livelihoods. The rich, clayey soil of the region provided excellent conditions for farming.

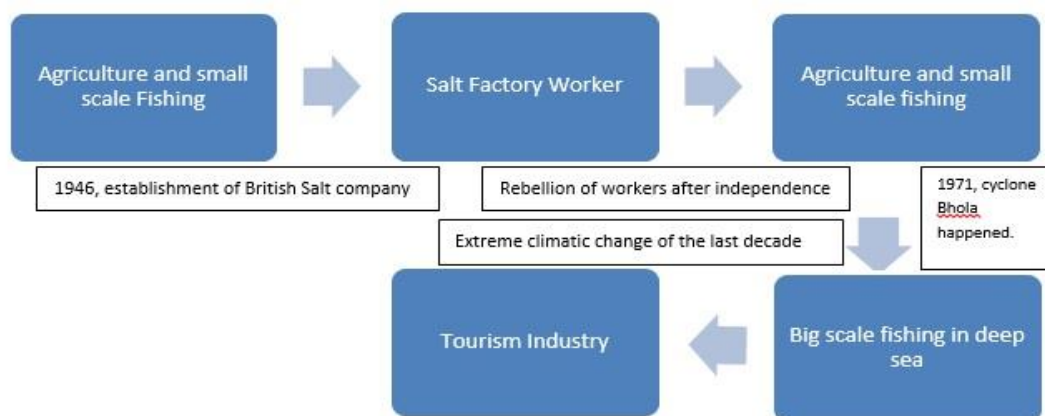
Figure 2: Satellite Image (GPS) of the Saltgheri village. (Source: Google earth)



However, a significant shift in occupation occurred in 1946 when a British-Indian salt company established an edible salt production facility in the village. Some villagers were compelled to work there as labourers for meager wages. The name 'Saltgheri' originates from this salt factory, signifying the "place where salt is produced." Following India's independence, villagers protested against the harsh exploitation by the company, resulting in an uprising during which they dismantled the salt factory. Subsequently, the villagers returned to farming and small-scale fishing, marking the beginning of the second phase of occupational change. At this juncture, it is worth mentioning that the villagers lacked the expertise for large-scale fishing in the deep sea, as they typically used small skiffs and nets. The third phase of occupational change occurred in the early 1970s when the powerful cyclonic storm 'Bhola' struck the island, causing the village to be inundated with saline seawater. This inundation rendered previously fertile agricultural lands barren and unsuitable for cultivation. Consequently, some villagers left in search of better livelihood opportunities, while those who remained began engaging in manual labour in nearby suburban and urban areas. The settlement's geographical proximity to the beach offered an alternative means of survival to the remaining villagers. Some fishermen

from the 'Basirhat' area anchored their trawlers and fishing vessels near Saltgheri to obtain essential provisions. This interaction led to collaboration, with villagers learning deep-sea fishing techniques, boat construction, and other strategies from the Basirhat fishermen. Over time, some of these fishermen resettled in Saltgheri with their families, marking the continuation of the third phase of occupational transition, which lasted for several decades. The fourth phase of occupational change emerged in the last one and a half decades, as some villagers gradually lost interest in deep-sea fishing due to increased risks and casualties, particularly during Hilsa fish catches. The unpredictable nature of the sea had always been a concern for fishing families, but in recent years, this unpredictability intensified, making the fishermen's livelihoods increasingly insecure. This insecurity prompted the fourth phase of occupational change, as some villagers living near the beach began constructing tourist resorts to leverage the village's location and available space. Those residing farther from the shore found employment as labourers in these newly built resorts. Currently, Saltgheri has only a limited number of deep-sea fishermen, as the village has become a popular tourist destination. (Mandal & Guha, 2021)

**Figure 3: Illustration of the occupational shift in Saltgheri village. (Source: Authors)**



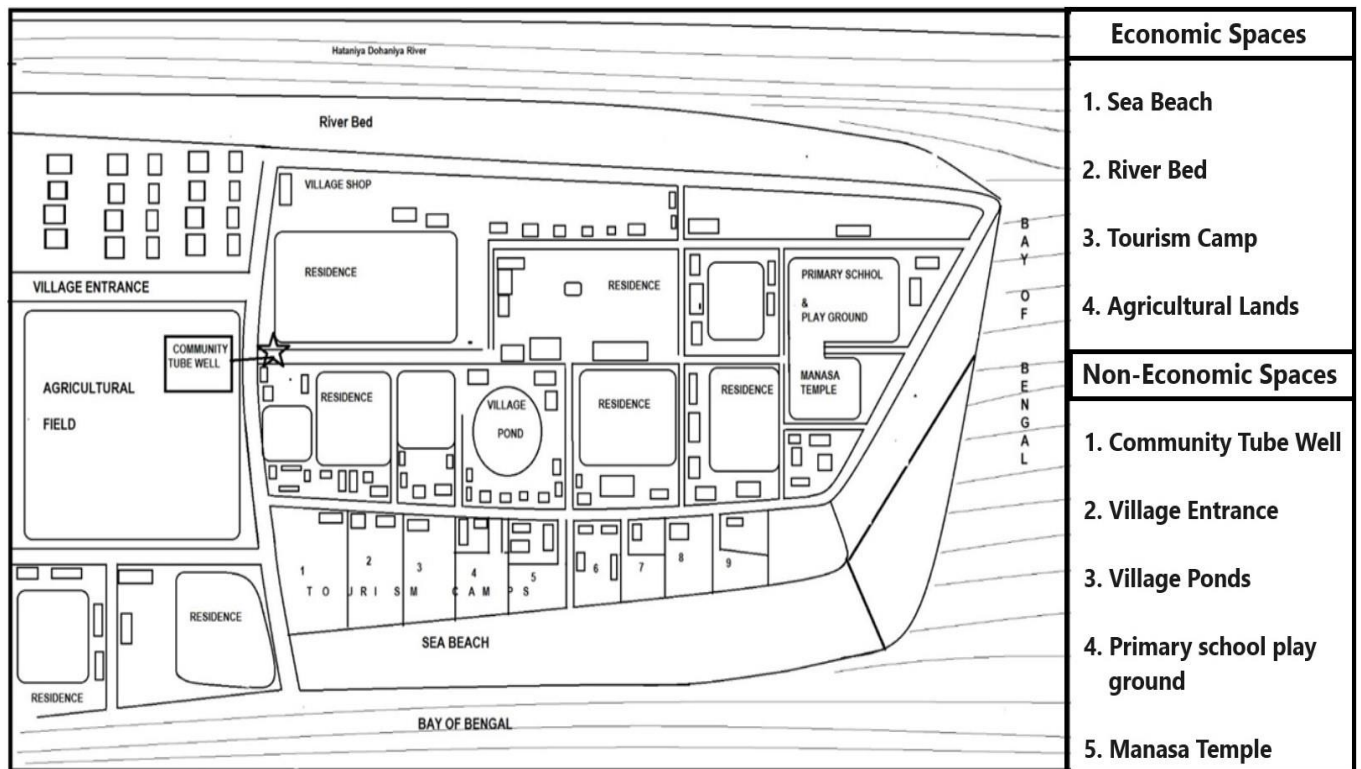
### Gendered Spaces in the studied locale

In the present study we have classified the gender space under two broad categories: economic gendered space and non-economic gendered space. Although our primary emphasis is placed on the economic gendered space, it is essential to investigate the non-economic domain in order

to gain insight into how shifts in occupations have fundamentally altered the characteristics of gendered space within the economic domain. In our research, we once again categorized the economic dimension of gendered space into primary economic spaces and secondary economic spaces, and we also divided the non-economic aspect of gendered spaces into domestic spaces, spaces designated for leisure and recreation, and spaces allocated for religious activities.

In the Saltgheri village, the primary economic spaces encompass the sea beach, riverine bed, agricultural fields, and tourism camps. Secondary economic spaces involve the riverine bed, kitchen gardens, cattle sheds, and courtyards. In the non-economic domain, areas such as kitchens, courtyards, and backyards are utilized for domestic purposes. Spaces designated for leisure and recreation encompass village entrances, areas associated with the community hand pump, the sea beach, and the primary school field. Finally, spaces allocated for religious activities include home worship areas, the Tulsi platform, and the Manasa Temple.

**Figure 4: Layout of the village depicting the gendered spaces in Saltgheri. (Source: Authors)**





The sea beach serves multiple purposes, acting as a predominant economic zone on one hand, while also serving as a source of leisure and recreation for the villagers on the other. During the working hours, the beach sees significant activity as fishermen gather to retrieve fish from trawlers, and extensive fishing nets are readied and maintained in preparation for their upcoming ventures into the Bay of Bengal. The beach's fishing activities are primarily conducted by male fishermen, and there is a distinct absence of female involvement in large-scale fishing operations. Additionally, tourists typically enjoy the beach during daytime, and in consideration of their privacy, the villagers refrain from using the beach during those hours. Beyond 8 pm, the sea beach undergoes a transformation into a private space for the women of the village, who utilize it for leisure activities and socializing. Subsequent to this time, both the villagers and tourism camp owners restrict tourists from accessing the sea beach.

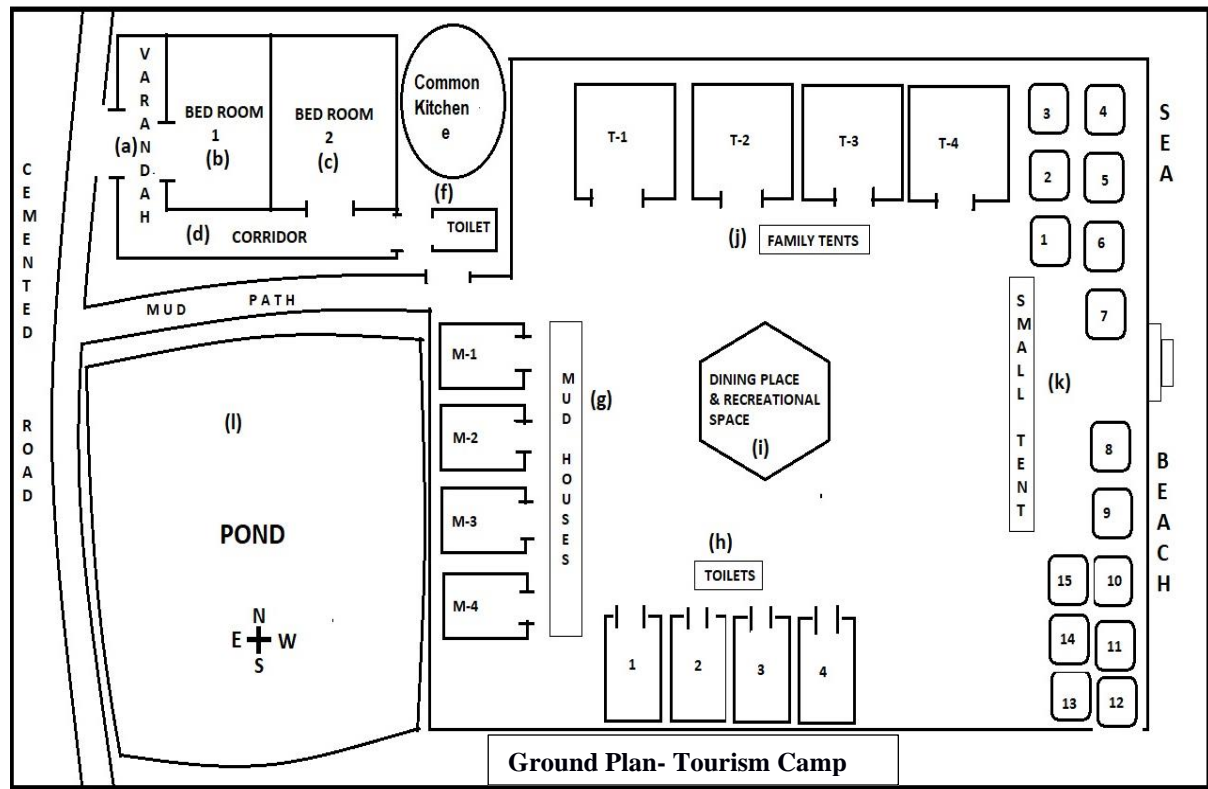
Similar to the sea beach, the riverine bed also demonstrates a spatial overlap, serving the dual roles of both a primary economic space and a secondary economic space. This area primarily serves as the main economic space for male fishermen, where they anchor their trawlers and large fishing skiffs, conducting essential maintenance tasks. Furthermore, they also engage in boat construction activities along this riverbed, which is located adjacent to the Hataniya-Dohaniya River. The riverbed functions as a secondary economic space for the village women, who are involved in activities such as small-scale fishing, collecting prawn seeds, and catching crabs.

The agricultural fields represent gender-neutral spaces where both men and women carry out their respective tasks during the harvesting seasons. In the off seasons, when the fields are dry and unproductive, the men in the village often utilize this time for leisure, engaging in conversations and sometimes indulging in alcoholic beverages.

Tourism camps provide conducive environments for a comprehensive observation of gender divisions in labour and available amenities. The male employees at the camps primarily handle guest interactions, public engagement, room servicing, reception desk duties, and food service. In contrast, the female staff members are exclusively involved in kitchen activities and cleaning both the kitchen and dining areas. Male employees enjoy unrestricted access to nearly all areas

within the tourism camps, whereas female employees have limited access restricted to the kitchen, dining area, corridors, pond ghat, and the communal restroom.

Figure 5: Ground plan of a tourism camp in Saltgheri. (Source: Authors)

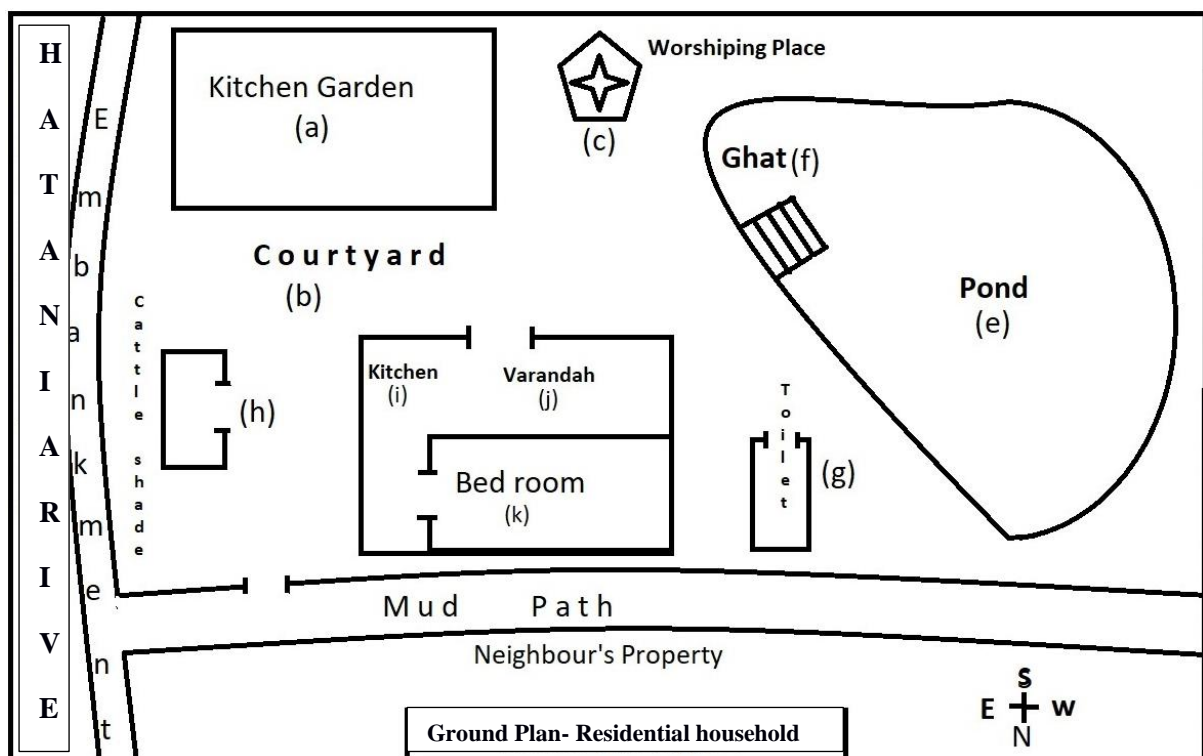


In our current study, the kitchen garden is classified as a secondary economic space due to its indirect yet substantial impact on the family's economy. These kitchen gardens are predominantly situated in the open spaces adjacent to the kitchen, within the courtyard, or in the backyard of the houses. Women from the village are primarily responsible for the preparation and maintenance of these kitchen gardens, with men making limited contributions to their production. Housewives invest a significant portion of their daytime in these locations, where they typically cultivate a diverse array of vegetables and greens, including but not limited to potatoes, tomatoes, eggplants, cabbage, chili peppers, onions, turmeric, spinach, and more.

The courtyard represents another crucial secondary economic space, serving a multitude of economic and non-economic functions. Agriculturists utilize it for drying, threshing, and

storing their harvested crops. Village women engaged in handicrafts such as bidi binding and conch shell crafts use the courtyard as their workspace. Additionally, this space serves as an area for women to care for their children, while men use it for relaxation and leisure upon returning from their work. This area appears to be accessible to both men and women, although women tend to be more actively engaged with it throughout the day.

**Figure 6: Ground plan of a residential household in Saltgheri. (Source: Authors)**



Each house in the village maintains cattle shed, typically housing one or two cows and a few goats. The cows are raised for domestic milk consumption, while the goats are prepared for sale in the market. Both men and women are involved in the upkeep of the cattle shed, each with distinct responsibilities. Women are generally responsible for maintaining the cleanliness of the cattle shed and milking the cows, while men handle tasks such as preparing fodder and taking the animals out to graze.

In the studied locale, the kitchen occupies a substantial portion of women's daily routines. This space primarily falls within the non-economic domain and is mainly utilized by village women

for tasks beyond cooking, including child-rearing, sewing, socializing with other women, and as a place to rest. In many households, the kitchens are distinct from the living rooms and are situated separately within the courtyards. Typically, there is minimal male involvement in the kitchen, except when it also serves as a dining area.

The backyard is commonly employed for activities such as storing firewood, drying clothes, and disposing of kitchen waste. Access to the backyard is equal for both men and women. Additionally, in some households, the backyard serves as a space for cultivating a kitchen garden.

The village entrance, marked by a large banyan tree, functions as a communal gathering spot for the village men, especially the younger teenagers. This area is commonly utilized for leisure activities, engaging in casual chitchats, playing online games, and enjoying games like carrom and cards. During the afternoon, middle-aged and elderly men often congregate at this location for card games and further social interactions.

The area adjacent to the community hand pump is another important space for women, where they find leisure. Typically, in the morning and afternoon, village women gather in this location to fetch drinking water and engage in casual conversations with one another.

The playground adjacent to the primary school functions as a shared recreational space for everyone, irrespective of their gender. Village teenagers engage in activities such as cricket, football, hide and seek, and other games on this field. Additionally, village men and women utilize this area for social interactions with their friends and neighbours.

In the studied area, house worship spaces are typically located in a small area next to the bedroom, or a small hut-like structure is constructed near the cattle shed for religious activities. Within the Hindu community, it is typically the women of the house who carry out daily religious practices, including idol worship, prayers, and the upkeep of the worshiping space. Among the Muslim community, there is no fixed space designated for religious activities, and both men and women offer their prayers to Allah on the bedroom floor.

The Manasa temple holds great religious importance in the village of Saltgheri. While the temple's priest is a man, the majority of devotees are women. Almost every day of the year, village women, in particular, visit the temple to participate in prayers. However, on the day of Manasa Puja, both men and women participate in the religious rituals.

## **OBSERVATIONS**

The subsistence pattern of the studied village exhibited changing modalities in different time frames. Initially, when they were primarily engaged in agriculture, men took the lead in cultivation, while women were responsible for harvesting the crops, drying them, threshing to collect edible grains, and ultimately storing them. Both men and women within a family also embarked on secondary occupations together, including activities such as small-scale fishing, the cultivation of kitchen gardens and cattle rearing. During that era, both men and women made nearly equivalent contributions to household and village economies. At that time, gendered divisions of space in the workplace were not prominent, and both men and women enjoyed equal rights in their respective workspaces including agricultural fields, riverine bed, cattle shade, courtyard and the kitchen garden. During that period, the mutual economic reliance between both genders often led to the emergence of ambiguous situations, where both males and females had nearly equal access to various spaces. The following case 1 depicts how both genders utilized their economic and non-economic spaces before the occurrence of occupational shifts.

Case 1: A (M, 87), a resident from Saltgheri village stated that he has been a witness of all of the occupational shifts as he stayed in the village since his birth. He also stated that he was only 13 years old when he got engaged in agriculture with his parents in their own 5 Bigha land. He also recalled depicted most of his neighbours were also engaged in agriculture and only a few of them were engaged in manual labours in other villages. Both of his parents use to work together as that time they couldn't afford manual labour on a daily wage and the scenario was similar to all of the residents. He and his father used to plough the lands, sow the seeds and maintain the irrigation to provide sweet water into the field and his mother use to help them implanting the paddy plant in the agricultural mud fields, providing manure in the paddy plants, cutting the paddy straw in the harvesting seasons, thrashing the paddy straw and preparing rice from the paddy grains. He also recalled that his parents used to do fishing in Hataniya-Dohaniya River where his father used small hand-operated fishing nets to catch small fish, while his mother collected prawns and prawn seeds using a mosquito net attached to a wooden frame, wading into the waist-high river water. During dry seasons, they heavily relied on the Hataniya-Dohaniya River for their survival. In their household both of his parents used to do participate in domestic works. His mother use to operate in the kitchen and his father used to cultivate several vegetables and fruits in a small piece of land on their kitchen. His mother managed the kitchen, while his father cultivated various vegetables and fruits in a small piece of land near the kitchen. His mother

also looked after the cattle shed, where they had two cows and two bulls, while his father took them out to graze. He also stated that in the afternoon their neighbouring women used to come in their courtyard and his mother used to do gossip with them while cleaning the courtyard with a broom. In the evening his father's friends and the neighbouring men used to do chit-chat on their courtyard with his father resting on mats and his mother used to serve puffed rice mixed with mastered oil, onion and chilly for their adda. The pond ghats were also a useful place for them where her mother used to socialize with other women during washing cloths and baths and that time no men used to roam around that place. The men usually took bath either in the morning or in the afternoon after returning from their works. In addition, He and his parents would often go to the beach, especially in the afternoons. There, he would enjoy playing games like 'kabaddi' and 'danguli' with his friends, while his parents would engage in socializing with other families.

In 1946, with the establishment of the salt factory in the village, a significant occupational shift occurred. The majority of the men transitioned from agriculture to employment in the factory to secure higher earnings, while women assumed responsibility for managing secondary occupations. Within the factory, women were not permitted to participate in salt production, which led to a strengthening of male dominance in the working space of Saltgheri village due to their increased contribution to the family economy. Consequently, the primary economic spaces shifted from agricultural fields to the salt factory, leading to a reduction in women's access and significance within the village economy. In that era, all economic and non-economic areas were open to men, while women were limited to accessing a few non-economic and secondary economic spaces only. The increasing male dominance in economic contributions gave rise to patriarchal sentiments within the community, resulting in gender-based distinctions in the utilization of various spaces, particularly those related to economic activities. The following case 2 describes how gendered meaning attached with both economic and non-economic spaces during the first occupational shift.

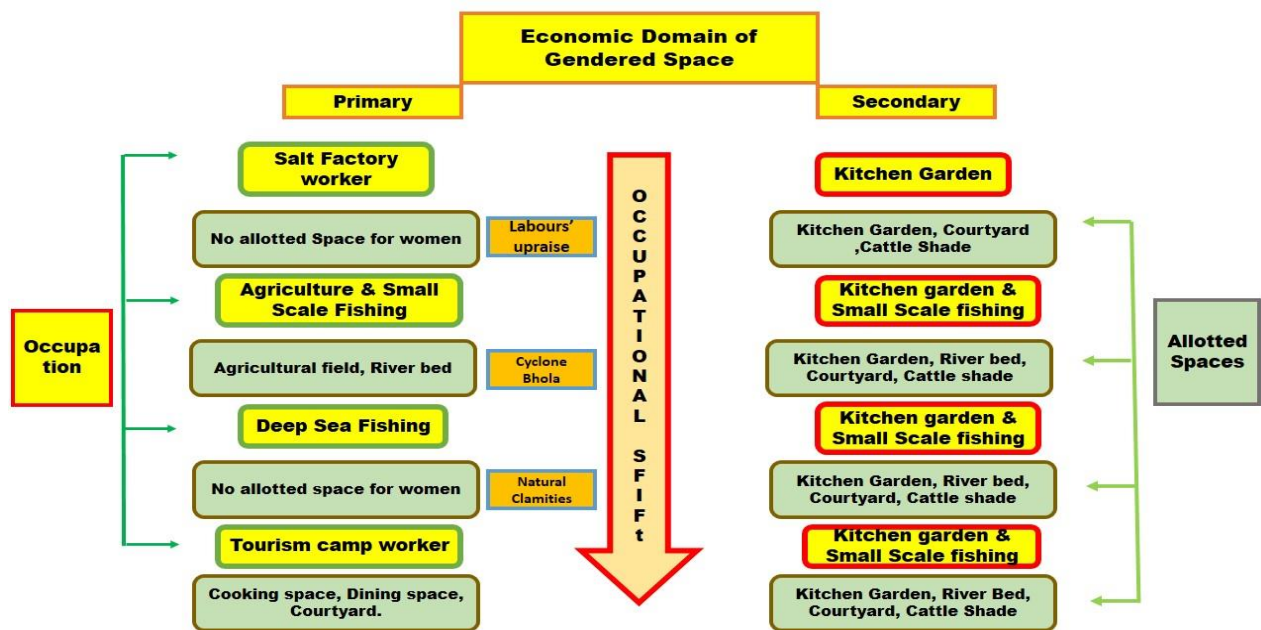
Case 2: B (M, 85), an ex-fisherman from the Saltgheri village narrated that, both of his parents used to work on their own agricultural land. However, a few years before India's Independence, a British company set up a salt factory near the village's southernmost point, adjacent to the sea beach. Back in those days, the village had a very inadequate irrigation system, which meant that crop production heavily relied on the monsoon. This resulted in inconsistent crop yields during the harvest seasons. However, his parents decided to work at the salt factory in order to boost their family's income. Unfortunately, the factory owners prohibited women from entering the factory, so only his father was able to work there and earn a daily wage. Previously, the sea beach had been a place for leisure for them. After the factory was established, it became a commercial hub for outsiders such as traders, daily labourers, and officials, and women were not allowed to access it. During that era, agriculture in the village experienced a decline as most of the men chose to work in the salt factory for better earnings. Women, including his mother, turned to small-scale fishing, catching prawns and crabs, and collecting

prawn seeds from the Hataniya-Dohaniya River along the riverbanks. As his father occupied as a salt factory worker, his mother had to shoulder an increased workload in domestic chores, managing the kitchen, cattle shed, kitchen gardens, backyards, courtyard, and worshipping spaces all by herself. For his mother, the pond ghats, courtyards, and the kitchen became places for relaxation and socializing with other women. His father, upon returning from work, found recreational spaces at the village entrance, riverbed, and the sea beach, where he would chat and play cards with his friends.

After India achieved independence and the salt factory was dismantled, the workers returned to their former occupation in agriculture, marking the second occupational shift. Women also re-engaged in primary economic activities, contributing to the village's economy. Once again, both genders began to share primary and secondary economic spaces as well as non-economic spaces. Despite their return to their previous occupations and the shared use of economic and non-economic spaces, the patriarchal sentiment that emerged during the first occupational shift did not disappear entirely; rather, it persisted in a latent form.

**Figure 7: Diagram depicting the changes in economic gendered space due to occupational shift.**

(Source: Authors)



The case 3 elaborates how their utilization of gendered spaces again transformed when they returned to their previous occupation.

Case 3: C (M, 87), a former agriculturist who has lived in the village since birth, shared that his father used to work at the salt factory. Unfortunately, the factory's manager and other higher-ups exploited the workers by paying them very low daily wages. After India gained independence, the factory workers rebelled against the harsh treatment. They were enraged and even resorted to violence, leading to the deaths of some of the oppressive officials, including the manager. Eventually, they completely dismantled the factory. Following the closure of the factory, his father and his fellow workers returned to their previous occupation, which was agriculture. His mother also began assisting him in farming during the harvest seasons. In the past, his mother had managed all the household chores by herself. However, after his father retired from the salt factory, he started helping her with various tasks, such as tending to the kitchen garden, cleaning the cattle shed, and grazing the animals. Additionally, he engaged in small-scale fishing with his mother in the riverbed. The sea beach once again became accessible to women and children for leisure activities, where He played with his friends, and his parents socialized with other families, especially in the afternoons. His mother and other women spent their free time at the pond ghats, courtyards, back yard, riverbed, and kitchen. Meanwhile, his father and other men used the village entrance, riverbed, courtyards, and sea beach for their recreational activities and enjoyment.

In the third phase of occupational shift, women once more lost their primary economic space as the agricultural lands were submerged in saline water, and men departed for deep-sea fishing on a larger scale, joining the fishermen from Basirhat. During this period, a noticeable transformation in the spaces accessible to women can be observed, encompassing both economic and non-economic domains. The outsider fishermen began mooring their large skiffs alongside the riverbed, and the sea beach, which was previously a recreational area, transformed into a bustling workspace for these fishermen. As a result, women involved in small-scale fishing, prawn seed collection, and crab collection experienced a notable reduction in their secondary workspace along the riverbed, and their access to the sea beach became restricted. During this period, the men also began to impose restrictions on the mobility of women within the village, with the intention of maintaining a certain distance between them and the fishermen from Basirhat. The non-economic spaces, such as the kitchen, areas around the community hand pump, and domestic religious spaces, were primarily utilized by women. In contrast, the courtyard, backyard, sea beach, and Manasa temple were accessible to both genders, while the village entrance was mainly frequented by men. The case 4 and case 5 state the changes in utilization of spaces by both men and women during the third occupational shift.

Case 4: D (M, 75), an ex-fisherman who has lived in the village since birth, shared that he initially worked in agriculture, and both his parents and his wife assisted him in cultivating their own land. However, in the 1970s, a powerful cyclone named Bhola struck the island. It caused a surge of saline water to inundate his farmland, rendering it barren and uncultivable to this day. Following this

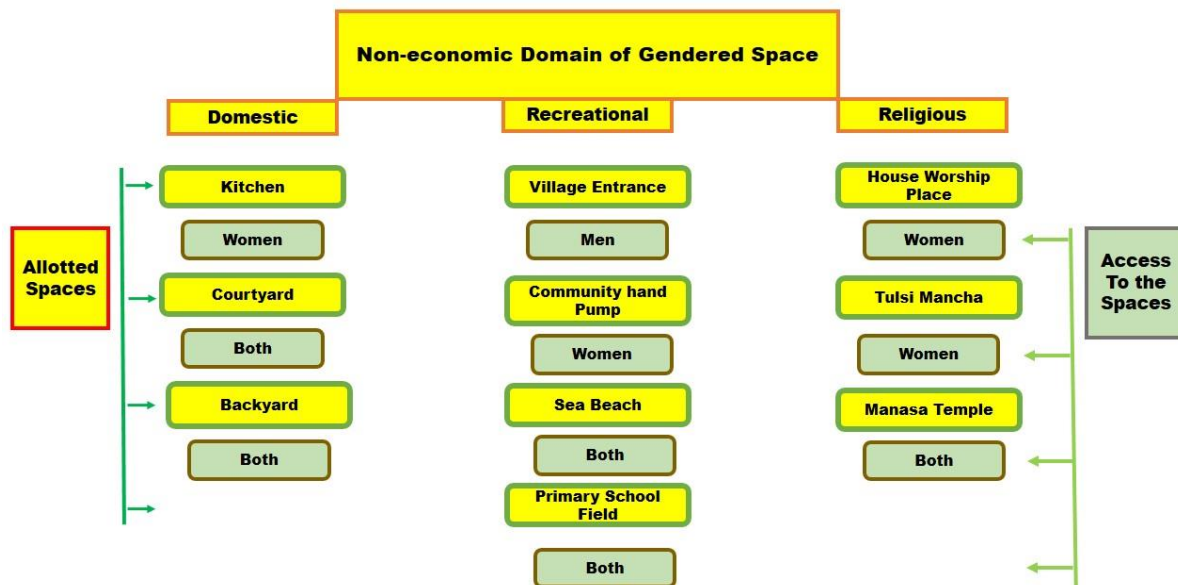


devastating event, he left the village for a few months in search of opportunities in nearby towns but returned empty-handed. During that time, some fishermen from Basirhat started using the Hataniya-Dohaniya River as an entry point to the Bay of Bengal. They often anchored their fishing trawlers in the riverbed to collect essential supplies from the village. This presented a significant opportunity, and many young villagers, including himself, learned to weave large fishing nets from them. They ventured into deep-sea fishing as their new profession, which he pursued for the next 35 years. He also mentioned that during this period, outsiders, particularly alien fishermen, began visiting the village frequently, especially areas close to the river and the sea. Some of them behaved disrespectfully, mocking or teasing the village girls. As a result, the villagers became cautious and restricted young girls from visiting certain places like the seashore, riverbed, and the barren lands near the river. Despite these concerns, most of the village men, including himself, ventured into the deep sea for large-scale fishing. Meanwhile, the village women, including his mother and wife, continued their small-scale fishing in the riverbed. They formed small groups for protection from outsiders. As he used to spend several days at sea, the domestic responsibilities, such as managing the kitchen, cattle sheds, kitchen garden, and worship space, fell entirely on his mother and wife. During his off days, he used spaces like the seashore, village entrance, and riverbed for leisure and recreation. There, he engaged in conversations with his friends and fellow fishermen and occasionally enjoyed country liquor. In contrast, his mother and wife socialized with other women and spent their leisure time at places like the pond ghats, kitchens, courtyards, and the newly established Manasa temple.

Case 5: E (F, 70), a housewife who has lived in the village for 50 years, shared her experiences. She recalled that she was newly married when the Bhola cyclone inundated Saltgheri. Before the cyclone, her husband and in-laws assisted with agriculture. However, after the cyclone, both her husband and father-in-law turned to deep-sea fishing, spending 7-10 days on fishing trawlers. In response, she and her mother-in-law began catching prawns and crabs and collecting prawn seeds by the riverbed. The situation became challenging when young fishermen from Basirhat began misbehaving with them. Village men restricted them from visiting certain areas alone, such as the seashore, riverbanks, and agricultural lands. To continue fishing, women formed small groups, and she and her mother-in-law always stayed together. Often, multiple such groups operated simultaneously to protect themselves from outsiders. With their husbands frequently absent from home for several weeks, she and her mother-in-law had to take on the responsibilities of domestic work. This included maintaining the kitchen, tending to kitchen gardens, cleaning cattle sheds, and maintaining the worship space. In their house, she cleaned the cattle shed and the worship area, offering prayers to the gods. In contrast, her mother-in-law collected fodder for the cattle, grazed them, cooked in the kitchen, and tended to the kitchen garden. She fetched drinking water from the village's only community hand pump at that time. During this time, she engaged in conversations with other women. She and her mother-in-law also gossiped with their neighbours at the pond ghats while washing clothes, utensils, and bathing. In the afternoon, women from neighbouring houses gathered in their courtyard. Young women played Ludo, while older women engaged in chitchats and spiritual discussions. Some days, especially in the winter, she and her friends gathered in the small area of the Manasa temple to spend their leisure time. Her husband and father-in-law were rarely present at home during the daytime. On their days off, they often spent time with friends by the riverbank, seashore, and village entrance.

During this phase, a clear male dominance in space utilization was evident within the community, indicating a resurgence of active patriarchy in terms of power allocation and decision-making.

**Figure 8: Depiction of gendered spaces in noneconomic domain. (Source: Authors)**



In the fourth phase, when the villagers started to establish tourism camps the women got another opportunity to contribute in the village economy from frontline. However, the male predominance in economic areas endured, resulting in a pronounced distinction of spaces based on gender. The women who began working in the camps were assigned separate work areas, and this separation was implemented to create a physical distance between them, tourists, and workers from other villages. In terms of daily wages, female workers typically receive approximately half the remuneration compared to their male counterparts who engage in manual labour at the tourism camps. Women are also limited in their ability to access the sea beach for leisure and recreational activities during working hours, and they are only allowed to visit the beach with their families in the evening after 8 p.m. The primary school was founded in 2010, and following its establishment, women began to engage in leisure activities within the primary school playground, spending time with their friends and neighbouring women. It is important to note that the area is also accessible to men. Even in the present day, the village

entrance continues to serve as a recreational area for men, with women being restricted from accessing it. In domestic spaces, women continue to take care of the kitchen, while the courtyard and backyard are open to individuals of all genders. Within the household context, women predominantly use religious spaces like places of worship and Tulsi Platforms, whereas at the village level, both men and women have access to the Manasa Temple. In this phase, male dominance in economic workspaces is evident, along with the disparities faced by women in terms of daily wages and workspace access. Despite women having access to various non-economic spaces, there remains a distinct gendered division of these areas, reflecting the influence of patriarchy. The case 6 and 7 depict how gendered space reconstructed in the studied locale during the fourth phase of occupational shift.

Case 6: F (M, 45), a former fisherman turned tourism camp worker in Saltgheri village, shared his perspective. He explained that deep-sea fishing had become increasingly perilous due to the unpredictable weather of the Bay of Bengal. Over the last 15 years, nearly 150 fishing trawlers had sunk during cyclones and high tides, resulting in the loss of over a hundred lives during the *hilsa* fishing seasons. Several years ago, a villager, with the help of outsiders from Kolkata, established a tourism camp on his vacant land by the seashore. He began working there for a daily wage of 350/-. Presently, there are around 15 such tourism camps in the village, and a majority of the village's men and women are employed in them. He and his four associates are responsible for escorting guests from the Baghdanga and Patibania Ferryghat, maintaining the camp, setting up temporary tents, providing room service, serving meals, and handling reception desk duties. Women mainly work in the kitchen, washing bedding, occasionally serving food to the workers, and cleaning utensils. They are not allowed to directly interact with the guests. While male workers like him have unrestricted access to all areas within the tourism camps, female workers are confined to the kitchen, dining area, pond ghat, common toilet, and the tourism entry corridor. The beach in front of the camp is also not open to everyone. In the mornings, fishermen unload their skiffs full of fish, which local vendors purchase. During this time, typically only the guests visit the beach, which remains open to them throughout the day until 8 pm. During this period, villagers avoid entering the beach to respect the guests' privacy. He also mentioned an incident when a few drunken visitors misbehaved with village women who were spending leisure time on the beach. As a result, all tourism camp owners decided to restrict their access to the beach after 8 pm, reserving that time for village women to socialize with friends and family. In domestic settings, women are responsible for spaces like the kitchen, kitchen garden, cattle shed, courtyard, and worship areas, as men do not participate much in household activities. Women spend their leisure time at the pond ghats, kitchens, riverbed, community hand pump, Manasa temple, and the primary school playground. Men, on the other hand, spend their leisure time on the seashore, primary school grounds, riverbed, and in the courtyard. Young boys gather under the large banyan tree near the village entrance to play carrom boards and card games. Nowadays, some young boys also play online games on their smartphones in that area.

Case 7: G (F, 35), a tourism camp worker who has lived in the village for the past 22 years, stated that women in the village were not allowed to accompany their men on deep-sea voyages. So, initially, she began collecting prawn seeds and catching crabs and prawns with her mother-in-law in the riverbed. After a few years, when the tourism camps were established, she and other women started working

there to supplement their family income, earning a daily wage of 150/- to 200/-. At the tourism camp, she worked as an assistant to the cook and was responsible for cleaning bedding, the kitchen, dining area, and washing the daily-used utensils. Their access within the tourism camps was limited, as they were only allowed in the kitchen space, dining area, common washrooms, and village entry corridors. Since their husbands and relatives also worked in the tourism camps, they preferred to restrict direct interactions between women and tourists. Despite having to do more work than the male workers, they received nearly half the daily remuneration. They were also restricted from accessing the sea beach before 8 pm due to past unpleasant incidents. At home, she took on responsibilities in the kitchen, cattle sheds, backyard, and worship spaces, while her husband occasionally helped with cultivating the kitchen garden. In the mornings, before heading to the tourism camps, she regularly visited the community hand pump to fetch drinking water, where she socialized with other village women. In the afternoon, she visited the nearby pond ghat to clean household utensils, wash clothes, and bathe, spending considerable time chatting with other women there. Neighbouring women often visited her kitchen while she was cooking, providing an opportunity for gossip. Sometimes, in the late afternoon, they spent time in the primary school grounds, engaging in chitchat and playing ludo. She also had conversations with her friends when visiting the riverbeds for crab and prawn collection and in the evening, she and her neighbouring women used to spend times on her courtyard while binding *bidi*. She mentioned that on other days of the year, older women in the village typically visited the Manasa temple. However, on the day of Manasa puja, all members of the village, regardless of gender, gathered there to pray together.

## CONCLUSION

The historical account of occupational shifts and the provided case studies illustrate that subsistence patterns, characterized by production, discontinuity, and reproduction dynamics, played a significant role in shaping gendered spaces within the studied locale. Occupational shifts have been occurring for numerous decades, influenced by the geographical setting. This process has continued in sporadic stages since the 1940s and continues to exhibit characteristics of discontinuity and reproduction. Repeated environmental disruptions such as cyclones and super-cyclones have significantly affected the studied area, resulting in substantial impacts on the lives and economic stability of the community. Additionally, several other factors have contributed to conflicts and disputes related to livelihood, as previously discussed. The historical example of the Salt factory from approximately seven decades ago serves as an illustration of this context.

The occupational shifts within the village brought about significant changes in the allocation of gender-specific spaces. In the first shift, men transitioned from agricultural lands to the salt factory as their primary economic space, while women lost their primary economic roles in those spaces. However, access to secondary economic and non-economic spaces remained

relatively consistent for both genders. In the second shift, both genders reverted to their primary economic space, which were agricultural lands. During this period, both genders continued to have relatively equal access to secondary economic spaces and non-economic spaces. During the third shift, both genders faced the loss of their primary economic space. However, men discovered a new profession in deep-sea fishing, with the Bay of Bengal and the nearby village beach becoming their primary economic domains. As men were often absent from the village due to their fishing activities, their influence over secondary economic spaces diminished. In contrast, women continued to make use of these secondary economic spaces to contribute to the family's economy. In terms of non-economic spaces, women were predominantly present, although some gender divisions existed. Nonetheless, both sexes had nearly equal access to these non-economic areas. Finally, in the fourth phase of occupational shift, both males and females established their primary economic activities within the tourism camp. Here, a clear male dominance in power allocation and gendered division of space was evident. Women predominantly accessed secondary economic spaces and non-economic spaces, with no restrictions on men's access to these areas.

In this concluding section, we assert that within the Saltgheri village, the gendered space is endowed with patriarchy in power allocation, which is significantly evident in the economic domain. The gendered space in the economic domain exhibits dynamism, while in the non-economic domain, it remains relatively stable. Furthermore, when examining the impact of occupational shifts, the changes in gendered space become notably more pronounced. As a consequence of occupational shifts, gendered space underwent changes in its location, and the allocation of roles for women altered over time, as evidenced in this study. However, the gendered space in Saltgheri village often exhibits a character of flux as homogeneity and heterogeneity coexists.

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The Author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/ or publication of the article.

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