



IDC School of Design
অভিকল্প বিদ্যালয়



Communication Design Project 3

Macher Dhara (মাছের ধারা)

A narrative exploration of fish in Bengali life & tradition

Puja Saha 22M2261

Guided by - Mandar Rane

Approval Sheet

This Communication Design project report entitled “Macher Dhara - A narrative exploration of fish in Bengali life & tradition” by Puja Saha is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Masters of Design Degree in Communication Design.

Project Guide: Prof. Mandar Rane *M Rane*

Internal Examiner: *[Signature]*

External Examiner: *[Signature]*

Chairman: *[Signature]* 27/5/24

Declaration

I hereby declare that this document contains my original ideas and exploration. I have adequately cited and referenced the original sources wherever they have been used as a part of this project. I also declare that I have adhered to all principles of academic honesty and integrity and have not misrepresented or fabricated or falsified any idea/data/fact/ source in my submission. I understand that any violation of the above will be cause for disciplinary action by the Institute and can also evoke penal action from the sources which have thus not been properly cited or from whom proper permission has not been taken when needed.

Puja Saha.

Puja Saha 22M2261,
IDC School of Design, IIT Bombay
March 2024

Acknowledgement

This project wouldn't have navigated the currents as smoothly without the support of Prof. Mandar Rane, whose guidance became a compass throughout this journey. His insightful feedback and constructive criticism were invaluable in shaping the direction of "Macher Dhara". His expertise helped me bring this project to life in a way I could never have achieved alone. I'm also grateful to the professors who offered their perspectives during project presentations.

A special place in my heart goes to my parents, whose stories about fish and the ocean were like stepping stones leading me to this project. My heartfelt appreciation extends to everyone who shared their time, stories, and knowledge. Each contribution enriched this project and deepened its connection to the Bengali spirit. Thank you.

*“Where the hilsa fish, purified with oil, bathes in the Ganges of
broth and mounts a throne, be it of clay, bronze, glass or silver,
there my heart remains prostrated, overwhelmed by devotion,
and refuses to leave that site of pilgrimage.”*

- Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay

Abstract

Macher Dhara, meaning "Flow of fish" in Bengali culture is a vibrant children's book exploring the vital role fish play in Bengal. Through stunning illustrations, the story follows a fish's journey from the river depths to Bengali plates, highlighting its significance in everyday life, rituals, and art forms.

Dive into bustling fish markets, witness traditional Pattachitra artwork, and discover the spiritual connection Bengalis have with the river. This book celebrates the cycle of life intertwined with the river's bounty.

Macher Dhara is a visual and narrative journey showcasing fish as not just food, but a symbol woven into the fabric of Bengali culture – from cuisine to spirituality and art. Extensive research brings these stories to life through engaging illustrations. This project deepened my understanding of Bengali culture and the power of storytelling in preserving traditions.

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Introduction

When I look back to my childhood, I find fish intertwined with almost all our traditions. One such tradition during our family's centuries-old Durga Puja is the offering of a piece of uncooked fish to the deity. The feast on each of the five days of Durga Puja always included a non-vegetarian item, a practice I hadn't encountered in Bihar, where I grew up. In Bihar, non-vegetarian food was taboo during religious festivities. I didn't understand these differences in traditions until baba explained them to me. He patiently described how the rites and rituals of a community are shaped by their lived experiences. He explained that rivers were the lifeblood of people living in the deltaic plains, serving as a means of trade and travel, and fish was their main source of sustenance. According to him, offering fish to the goddess

was a way of paying tribute to the river, which in many ways, was the mother of the community living there.

Reflecting on these experiences, I understand how a simple fish can hold such profound significance in our lives. For my family and me, whenever we get together, sharing a meal of fish feels like a festival. My father would often take me to the bustling fish markets, teaching me about different fish species and their health benefits. These outings were more than just shopping trips; they were lessons in culture, tradition, and family heritage.

As I delved deeper into the role of fish in our lives, I realized its importance extends far beyond our dining table. Fish is a vital part of our daily life and a significant aspect of Bengali culture. This realization inspired me to create

"Macher Dhara," a project that explores the profound connection between the Bengali people and fish. Through this project, I aim to celebrate and preserve the rich cultural tapestry woven around this humble yet essential part of our heritage.

Growing up, my connection to Bengali culture felt like a distant memory. Moving from place to place, I embraced diverse influences, but a yearning for my heritage lingered. It wasn't until I explored Bengali language, rituals, and traditions that a powerful sense of belonging emerged. I was always mesmerized by our deep love for fish. It wasn't just the delectable flavors that filled our home but the profound importance fish held in everything from daily meals to grand pujas and even weddings.

Why this topic? Why fish?

Today, rapid modernization threatens cultural roots, especially for those like me, raised far from ancestral homes. Customs and traditions are often sidelined amidst the march of progress. This disconnect is most pronounced in younger generations, who grow up with limited exposure to their heritage.

Education often focuses on geography, history, or economics, but rarely delves into the rich tapestry of customs that define a place. This gap leaves many children unaware of the cultural practices that shape their identity.

This project aims to reconnect individuals, especially youth, with their cultural roots. It offers an engaging way to learn about the overlooked customs and traditions. Through the story, readers will discover the profound significance of fish in Bengali life, fostering a

sense of identity and belonging that transcends location.

Food, after all, acts as a powerful lens into a culture's history, beliefs, and values. In Bengali life, the saying "*Mache Bhate Bangali*" (Bengali by fish and rice) perfectly captures this essence. Fish isn't just sustenance; it is a symbol woven into the very fabric of Bengali's identity. It is an emotion, a thread connecting us to celebrations, ceremonies, and the cultural tapestry of Bengal. Every twist and turn seemed to lead to a shimmering fish pond, and in rural Bengal, it wasn't uncommon to see villagers taking a dip in the local waters and returning home with a smile and a dangling fish or two – a testament to the abundance and deep connection.

It is interesting to note that while fish and rice find mention in early medieval texts such as Charyapadas (11th century), dal which is now an absolute must with rice, makes a late appearance in the 15th century Bengali literature.

-Moni Gatha



Objective

The objective is to bridge the generation gap and ensure that the rich tapestry of Bengali culture continues to inspire and captivate young minds.

1. Spark Curiosity: Ignite a sense of wonder and excitement about Bengali culture among children by exploring the profound connection between Bengali people and fish.

2. Educate and Foster Appreciation: Educate children about the cultural significance of fish in Bengali society. This involves showcasing its role in tradition, religious ceremonies, and artistic expressions such as Pattachitra. By delving into these aspects, the project seeks to foster a deeper appreciation for Bengali heritage and traditions.

3. Promote Cultural Empathy: Cultivate cultural empathy and understanding among children by providing insights into Bengali customs and traditions. By understanding and respecting diverse cultural practices, children can develop a broader perspective and a greater sense of empathy towards others. Beyond mere education, it strives to cultivate cultural empathy and understanding, promoting a more inclusive and interconnected future. Through the exploration of fish in Bengali culture, children will not only gain knowledge but also develop a deeper appreciation for the diversity and beauty of cultural heritage.

Data Collection

Customs:

1. Aubirobhat, a customary ritual in Bengali weddings, involves serving the bride-to-be a meal of rice cooked with fish on the eve of her wedding day. This tradition symbolizes abundance, prosperity, and the beginning of a new chapter in the bride's life.
2. Annaprason marks the ceremonial introduction of solid food to a child in Bengali culture. Fish, particularly Hilsa or Rohu, is often included in the ritual meal to bless the child with health, prosperity, and wisdom.
3. Tattva, an integral part of Bengali weddings, signifies the exchange of betel leaves and betel nuts as a symbol of hospitality and prosperity. Fish is frequently offered to the groom's family during this ritual.

4. Matsamukhi is a post-death ritual observed in Bengali households, where fish is offered to the departed soul. This practice symbolizes the journey of the soul and the cyclical nature of life and death.

5. During festivals like Saraswati Puja and Vijaya Dashami, fish offerings are made to Goddess Saraswati and as a symbol of victory, respectively. This reflects the cultural significance of fish as offerings in religious ceremonies.

Beliefs:

1. It is believed that feeding fish before embarking on a journey brings good luck and ensures a safe and prosperous trip.

2. Bengalis often avoid having just one fried fish on a plate, as it is considered unlucky. Instead, they prefer to have at least two pieces of fish to ward off misfortune.

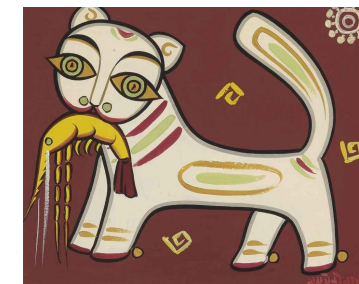
3. There is a belief that after death, one craves for fish as a final earthly desire. This belief underscores the deep-rooted connection between Bengalis and their affinity for fish.

Literature and Music:

1. Bengali folk songs often incorporate themes related to fish, such as "Macher Biye" (The Marriage of Fish) and "Mecho Bhoot" (The Fish-Eating Ghost), weaving captivating narratives around fish in folklore.



2. Fish motifs are prevalent in various forms of Bengali art, including alpona (traditional floor decorations), saree designs, sweet molds, and paintings by acclaimed artists like Jamini Roy and Abanindranath Tagore. These artistic representations celebrate the cultural significance and aesthetic allure of fish in Bengali art and culture.





Fish as an Epitome of a Rich Cultural History: Documenting the Cultural and Socio-religious Practices Surrounding Fish in Fish-loving Bengali Societies

*Shrestha Chakraborty, Research Assistant,
Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University*

Fish holds a profound cultural, social, and religious significance in Bengali societies, symbolizing divine power, luck, and prosperity. Rooted in ancient texts like the Matsya Purana, where Lord Vishnu's fish incarnation saves humanity, fish are revered and considered auspicious, featuring prominently in various rituals and traditions. Bengali weddings, for instance, include rituals where fish symbolize fertility and good fortune. Additionally, in certain temples, fish are offered as bhog (sacred food), reflecting their sacred status. This rich cultural heritage underscores the deep connection Bengalis have with fish, transcending culinary preferences to embody spiritual and traditional values.



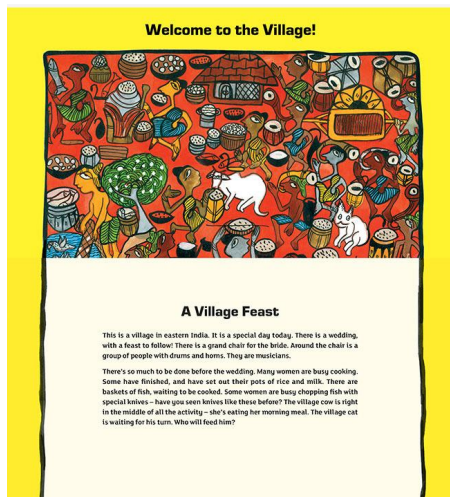
A Village Is a Busy Place!

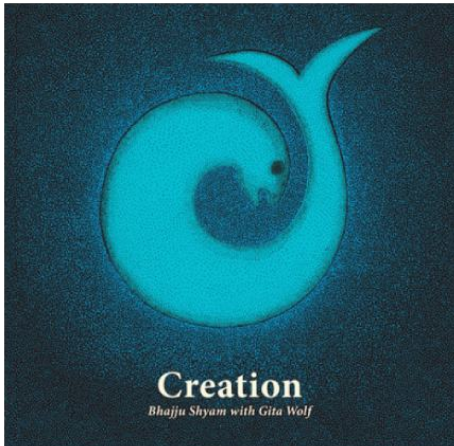
Book

"A Village Is a Busy Place!" by Tara Books isn't just a book; it's a bustling marketplace, a vibrant festival, and a glimpse into the heart of a traditional Indian village. Through the captivating illustrations of Rohima Chitrakar and V. Geetha, the book unfolds like a vibrant Patua scroll painting, showcasing the everyday activities that bring a village to life.

From bustling markets overflowing with colorful produce to the quiet rituals of daily chores, each scene pulsates with the energy of rural existence. Communal gatherings, vibrant festivals, and the intricate dance between humans and nature - all come alive within the book's pages. "A Village Is a Busy Place!" isn't just a visual feast; it's a celebration of community and culture. The interconnectedness of village life, its vibrancy and spirit, shine through each beautifully illustrated scene.

This book serves as both an educational resource, offering a window into a unique way of life, and a visual delight for readers of all ages. With its accessible and engaging style, it captures the essence of rural India, inviting readers to experience the warmth and dynamism of village life.





Creation

Book

"Creation," a stunning collaboration between Tara Books and the renowned Gond artist Bhajju Shyam, embarks on a captivating journey through the origin story of the world. This book isn't just a story; it's a vibrant tapestry woven from the rich tradition of Gond art.

Bhajju Shyam, a celebrated figure in the Gond community, breathes life into the creation myths of his people. Each page explodes with intricate illustrations, a visual feast that celebrates the deep connection to nature and the vibrant cultural heritage that defines Gond art.

"Creation" transcends the realm of a simple picture book. It offers a rare glimpse into the unique worldview of the Gond community, where storytelling and art intertwine. The book serves as both a cultural artifact, preserving traditions for future generations, and a source of inspiration, highlighting the enduring power of visual narratives. "Creation" is a testament to the timeless relevance of traditional stories, showcasing their ability to resonate with audiences even in contemporary times.

Insights

A nuanced understanding of the intricate relationship between cultural traditions and environmental influences. The rich tapestry of practices surrounding fish in Bengal, for example, underscores how local ecosystems shape cultural rites. The Durga Puja and Lakkhi Puja traditions highlight the deep-rooted connection between the people and their riverine surroundings.

The careful documentation of these practices offers a compelling narrative on how geography and ecology influence culture and tradition. It shows that the rites and rituals we observe are deeply intertwined with the natural world around us, often serving as a tribute to the sources of livelihood and sustenance. Moreover, the continued importance of fish in

these rituals, despite changing lifestyles, emphasizes the enduring significance of these natural elements in cultural identity and heritage.

The data collection has provided valuable insights into how deeply cultural traditions are rooted in the natural world and how they can serve as a means of ecological preservation. It has highlighted the importance of maintaining these traditions not only for cultural identity but also for the sustainable management of natural resources.

Ideation for story

Story 1

A fish narrates its own journey through the rivers and traditions of Bengal, sharing its significance in various customs and beliefs. From being a humble offering during Durga Puja to a symbol of prosperity in Lakkhi Puja, the fish recounts its encounters with different communities, highlighting how it has been revered and celebrated throughout history. The story is an intimate portrayal of the fish's life, capturing its resilience and the pivotal role it plays in the cultural fabric of Bengal. While the narrative explores the challenges the fish faces, it ultimately focuses on the enduring impact it leaves behind.

Story 2

A young girl visits her grandmother in a quaint Bengali village, bringing her a beautiful tant saree adorned with fish motifs. As the grandmother unravels the saree, it sparks a heartfelt conversation between them. They delve into the stories and significance behind the fish motifs, exploring the rich heritage and traditions of their family and community. The saree becomes a bridge connecting generations, with the grandmother sharing anecdotes of her youth and the girl learning about the cultural importance of fish in their customs. This touching story weaves together themes of family, tradition, and the enduring bond between past and present.

Story 3

A spirited girl, her mischievous pet cat, and her wise grandmother, Didun, embark on an enchanting journey through the bustling streets of Bengal after discovering a lost fish. Their quest to return the fish to its rightful place leads to unexpected adventures, revealing hidden gems of family history, local traditions, and the magical role of fish in Bengali culture. Along the way, they meet colorful characters and uncover secrets that strengthen their bond and deepen their appreciation for their heritage. This whimsical tale is a celebration of curiosity, family ties, and the vibrant culture of Bengal, with the lost fish guiding them to new discoveries and lasting memories.

*“Markets bustling, colors bright,
Fish with scales that shimmered light.
Didoon sail, “A lucky charm,
Bring blessings and keep us warm.”*



Final Narrative

Structure: A Circle of Life

The narrative structure itself mirrors this cyclical flow. It begins deep within the ocean's heart, teeming with life, and concludes by returning there. This circular flow underscores the interconnectedness of all things – the fish nourish the people, who in turn show their respect and dependence through rituals and offerings.

Themes: A River of Life Flows

Life and Sustenance: The very foundation of the narrative lies in the life-giving power of the sea. Fish are not merely a source of food, they represent prosperity and well-being.

Economy and Commerce: The haat (market) scene pulsates with the energy of commerce, highlighting the economic importance of fish in Bengali life. The fisherwoman, embodies the

generations who have relied on the ocean for their livelihood.

Love and Family: The narrative weaves in heartwarming threads of love and family. A couple's wedding adorned with fish signifies the sea's blessings for a prosperous union. Similarly, a pregnant woman and a mother preparing a meal showcase how the ocean nourishes families across generations.

Spirituality and Rituals: The Bay of Bengal is not just a source of sustenance; it holds deep spiritual significance. The Durga Puja exemplifies how fish offerings and decorations express gratitude for the ocean's bounty.


Similarly, the return of offerings to the sea signifies the cyclical nature of life and death, with the ocean serving as the ultimate cradle.

Art and Tradition: The narrative integrates

the artistic heritage of Bengal. The Pattachitra artwork and the fish-patterned saree illustrate how the ocean's essence is woven into the very fabric of Bengali culture.

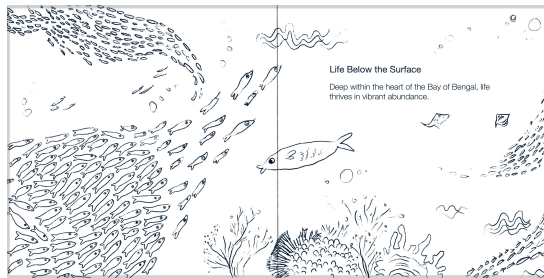
The title - Macher Dhara: A Flow of Life

"Macher Dhara" transcends a simple story; it's a celebration of an enduring connection. The flow of fish isn't just a physical movement; it's a metaphor for the flow of life itself – from the depths of the ocean to the Bengali way of life, encompassing economy, love, spirituality, art, and traditions. This narrative tapestry reminds us that the Bengali people and the Bay of Bengal are intricately intertwined, their destinies forever linked by this life-giving flow.

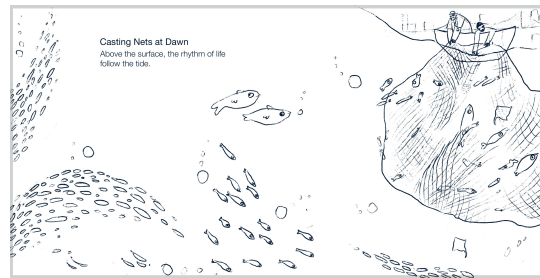


Storyboarding

Storyboard 01



Panel 1



Panel 2



Panel 3



Panel 4

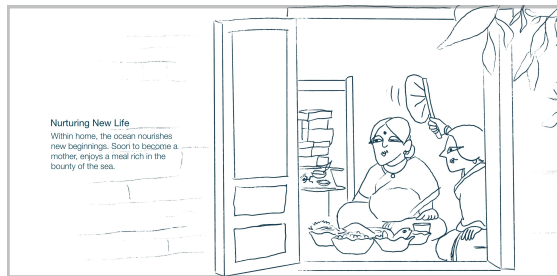


Panel 5

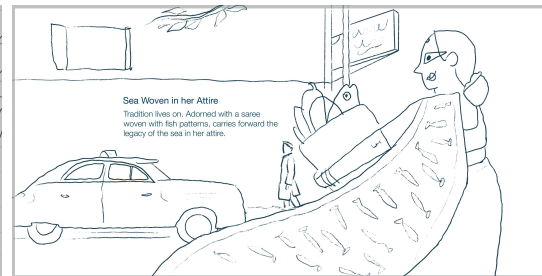


Panel 6

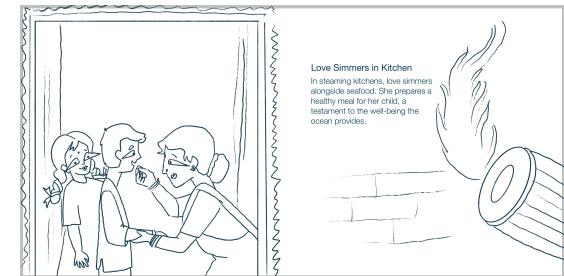
Storyboard 01



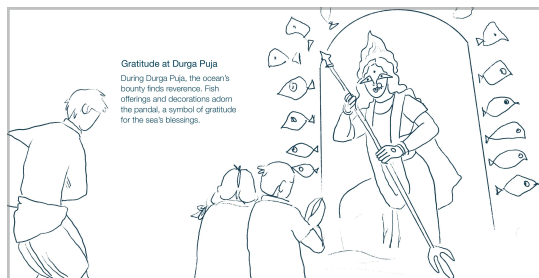
Panel 7



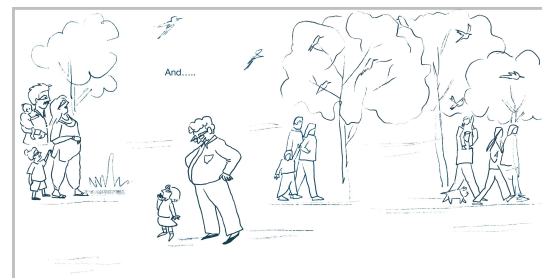
Panel 8



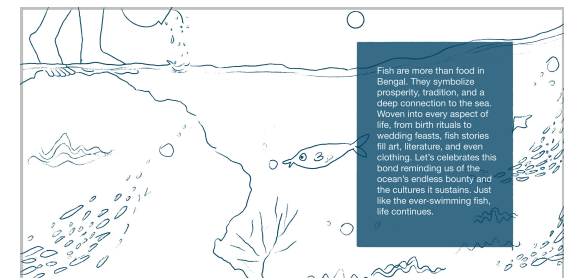
Panel 9



Panel 10

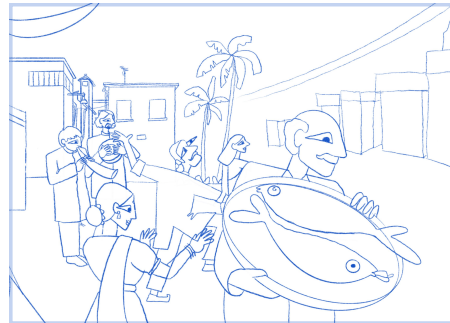
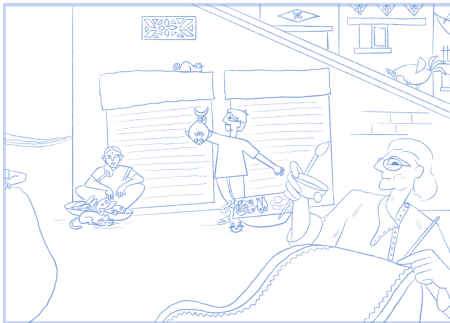
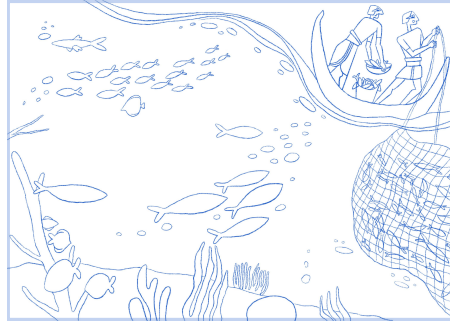
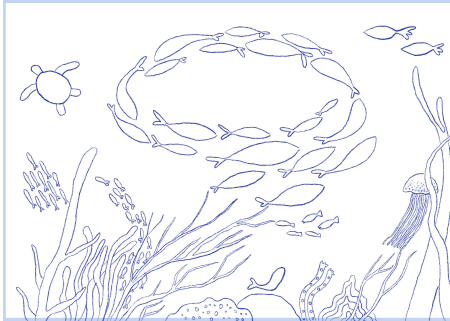


Panel 11

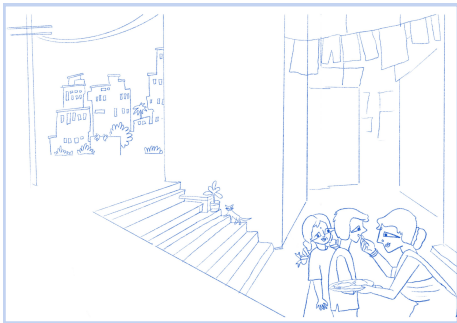
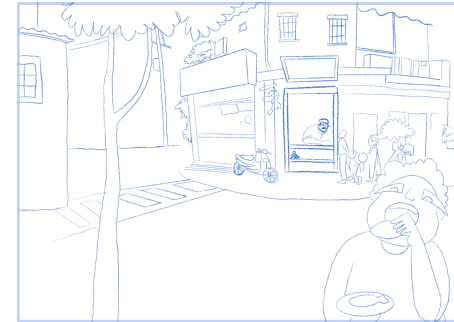
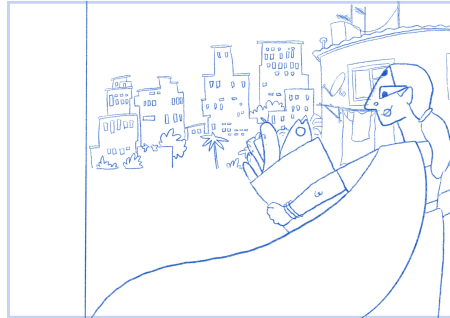
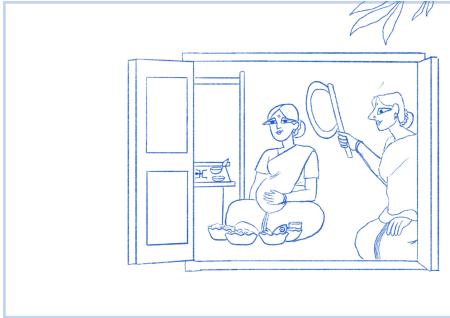


Panel 12

Final Storyboard

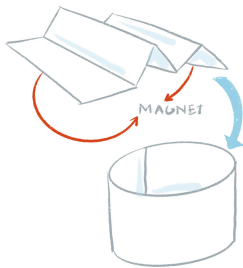


Final Storyboard

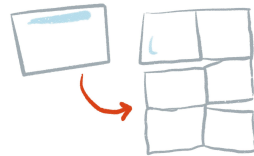


Book Format

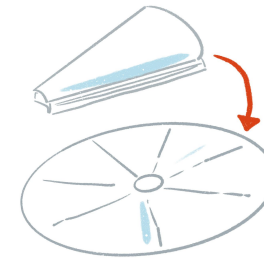
To enhance the story and emphasize the cyclical nature of life, the book's format will incorporate unique design elements that visually reinforce the cyclical themes:



Concept 1: A book that unfolds like an accordion, its two ends magnetically connecting to form a perfect circle.

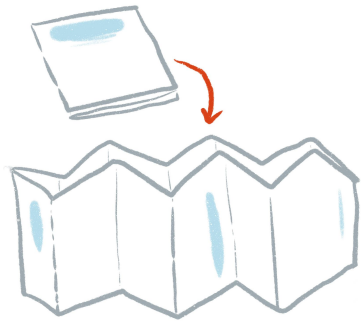


Concept 2: A book with folding panels. Each panel, when opened, reveals the entire page as a cohesive entity.



Concept 3: A book that is itself circular, its first and last frames seamlessly merging to depict the circle of life.

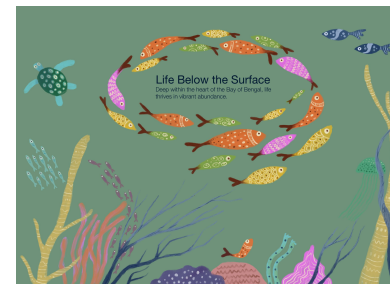
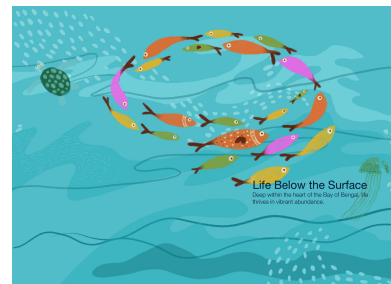
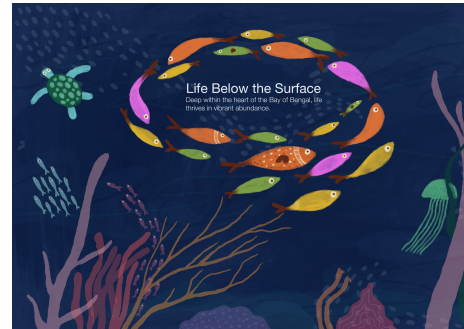
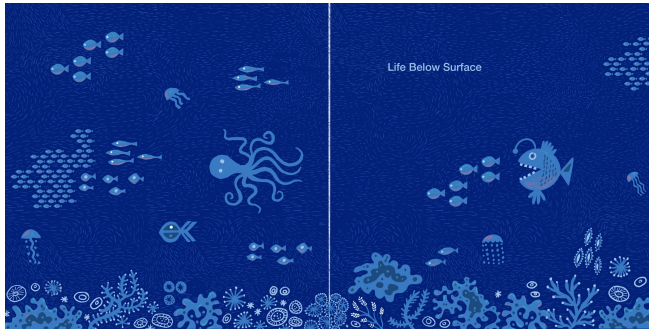
Final Format



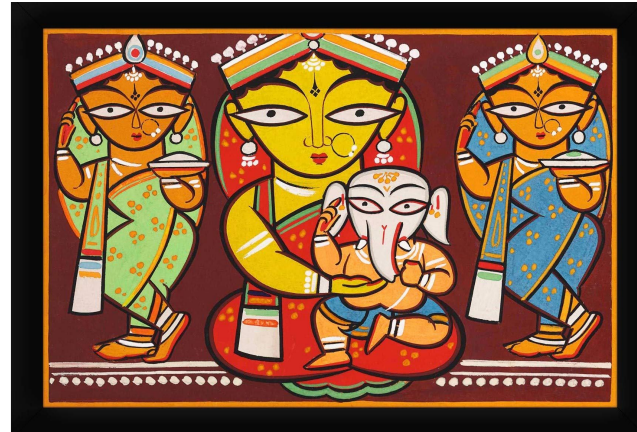
This concept envisions a book designed as a never-ending loop, where the first and last pages seamlessly connect. As readers turn the final page, they are immediately transported back to the beginning, visually and conceptually illustrating the eternal cycle of life.



Exploration



Inspiration for Illustration



Final Illustration





Final Book



Learnings

From this project, I gained valuable insights into the effort and creativity required to craft a compelling narrative. It offered me the unique opportunity to revisit old stories related to fish, shared by my parents, which enriched my understanding of our cultural heritage. I learned many new aspects about my own culture. This exploration deepened my appreciation for the art of storytelling, highlighting how stories can preserve and celebrate cultural identity. Overall, the project was an enlightening journey that enhanced my narrative skills and cultural knowledge.

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Citation: Chakraborty, Shrestha. 2024. Fish as an Epitome of a Rich Cultural History: Documenting the Cultural and Socio-religious Practices Surrounding Fish in Fish-loving Bengali Societies. Journal of South Asian Exchanges 1.1 < <https://saexchanges.com/v1n1/v1n107.pdf> >
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