

A Study on the Bengali Culture with a Reference of Modernity

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Abstract – Bengali Hinduism by and large conforms to the orthodox Vedantic variety of that faith, although in response to the cultural impact of the British in the last century there emerged certain modernistic variants (e.g., the Brahmo Samaj, to which some Westernized high-caste elites were drawn). The Shaivite cult, focusing on worship of the god Shiva and his female counterparts, is widespread among the upper castes, while Vaishnavism, involving devotion to the Lord Krishna, is popular among the lower castes. Bengali Muslims belong overwhelmingly to the Sunni division of Islam and generally conform to the Hanafi school of Islamic law. Popular religion in Bengal often displays syncretism, a mixing of both Hindu and Muslim folk beliefs, deities, and practices. Bengal is famous for its wandering religious mendicant folk musicians (e.g., the Bauls, who disdain caste and conventional Hindu/Muslim religious distinctions in their worship and way of life). In addition to formal worship at Hindu temples and Muslim mosques, popular worship involving religious folk music is widespread, especially at Vaishnavite gatherings (kirtan) and among Muslim followers of several Sufi orders (tarika) present in Bengal. Bengali Muslims are also known for their practice of "pirism," the cultic following of Muslim saints or holy men (called pirs).

Keywords: Bengali, Modernity, Culture

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INTRODUCTION

The customs and the traditions associated with Poila Baisakh and other Bengali festivals are considered as an important factor among the people of Bengali community. The Bengali traditions and the culture are quite different from the other parts of India and are worth noticing.

Rabindranath Tagore is one of the most prominent and key figures in the cultural West Bengal and almost all the Bengali festivities are marked with Rabindra Sangeet to honor the great Poet. In fact such is the influence of Late Poet that it is almost considered as a tradition to learn Rabindra Sangeet during the early childhood years for the Bengalis.

The culture of West Bengal is considered to be one of the richest cultures in India. Apart from boasting of its immense contribution in reformation movements, the state also takes the credit for being the pioneer of cosmopolitan culture in the country. Over the years, the culture of West Bengal has emerged as the perfect blend of modernity and traditions. The sanctity of Hooghly, the beauty of Eastern Himalayas, the diversity of Sunderbans and the freshness of the Tea Gardens, all blend together to constitute what we call the unique culture of West

Bengal. Bengali culture also has its root in Bengali music, Bengali cinema and Bengali literature. The delicious Bengali cuisine also forms an important constituent of the state's cultural heritage.

Beside there are other festival of importance too like Dolyatra, Saraswati Puja, Kojagori Lakshmi Puja, Rath Yatra, Janmashtami, Jagaddhatri Puja, Shivratri, Vishwakarma Puja, Kartik Puja, Raas Yatra, Ganesh Chaturthi, Eid al-Adha (Bakr-Id), Muharram, Buddha Purnima, Poush Parbon, Gajan, Bhai Phonta, Pohela Boishakh, Ganga Sagar Mela. Poyela Boishakh is the first day of the bengali new year.

Though Bengali women traditionally wear the sari and shalwar kameez, Western attire has gained acceptance among younger and professional women. While the traditional costume for men is dhoti, Panjabi, Kurta, sherwani, pyjama and lungi.

Oiled rice and roti constitute the staple Bengali food, and is served with a variety of vegetables, fried as well with curry, thick lentil soups, and fish, egg and meat preparations of mutton and chicken,

and more rarely pork, duck, lamb and beef by certain groups.

There were several post modernisation movements in the latter part of the 20th century, some of them were known as Kallol movement, Hungry movement and Little magazines. These movements saw some emerging leaders who would go on to be prominent names in the Bengali literature circle like Sukumar Ray, Jibananda Das, Sunil Gangopadhyay and Syed Mustafa Siraj being a few among them.

Bengali women traditionally wear a sari, draping the 'pallu' in a special manner that is exclusive to the state of West Bengal. With modernisation, shalwar kameez have also become famous with the newer generation wearing jeans, dresses and skirts too. The men used to wear dhoti kurtas in olden times but now do so only during some special occasions like during festivals or marriages. Their style is basically fusion with putting on a kurta with jeans apart from the westernised shirt pants. This touch of westernization is especially visible in Kolkata more than in any other city of West Bengal.

Bengal is known for its rich cultural influences like theatres, cinemas and folk music. The most popular form of folk music is Baul and it is richly influenced by the regional folk traditions from the core villages of West Bengal. Some other forms of folk music in Bengal include Kirtans, Bhawaiya, Gajan and also Gombhira. Usually the folk music, whether it is the Baul or the Kirtan, is associated and accompanied by a one stringed instrument known as Ektara.

The Bengali dance forms on the other hand draws their inspiration from the various folk traditions of Bengal, like the tribal dance form that is more prominent and evident in the tribal villages of West Bengal. The Chhau dance for instance is a form of Mask Dance and is much admired at different countries in the world.

IMPACT OF MODERNITY ON BENGALI CULTURE

Modernity can be defined as connecting to the new and the contemporary, rejecting the old. According to The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language: the word modern was first recorded in 1585 in the sense 'of present or recent times'. In Latin, modernus is derived from modo, meaning 'just now'. The English word modern was not originally concerned with anything that could later be considered old-fashioned. Obviously, modernity often is used to reject old-fashioned ideas and traditions. In the cultural and social contexts, modernity is also interlinked with the values of equality, freedom, feminism and democracy. It is generally assumed that the modernity in 19th and 20th century unleashed the power of scientific and industrial progress, which led to social equality, freedom of

downtrodden sections of the society, freedom to women. Democracy is also thought to be a modern concept of governance as against monarchs of ancient times. Modernity is also thought of as increasing the role of rationality in the public sphere and reducing the role of religion. Let us take these modern values one by one and explore them more.

The Hindu clergy is drawn from the highest (Brahman) castes and is thus a matter of birth-right, although not all Brahmans actually practice as priests (*pandit*, *purahit*). Practitioners within the Hindu system also include persons who withdraw from conventional society to become religious mendicants in search of personal salvation (*sadhus*). By contrast, in Bengali Islam, recruitment to the clergy is voluntary; any man who has the desire and opportunity to study the Quran (for which he must learn to read the classical Arabic language) can eventually become the worship leader (mullah or imam) of a local mosque if so chosen by the congregation. Further study of the Quran and of Muslim law (the *sharia*) may qualify a man to be a religious leader with a wider following, greater stature, and sometimes significant political influence.

The Bengali Hindu religious calendar is replete with worship ceremonies (*puja*) devoted to the deities of both the Great and Little Traditions. Especially important is the annual festival (*orgajan*) of the Lord Shiva, as are those of his counterpart goddesses, Kali and Durga. The goddesses Lakshmi (of wealth and good fortune) and Saraswati (of learning and culture) also have annual ceremonies. Important folk deities propitiated by Hindus and Muslims alike include the "goddesses of the calamities"—Sitala, goddess of smallpox; Olabibi, goddess of cholera; and Manasa, goddess of snakes—all of whom have their annual festivals. Bengali Muslims celebrate the major festivals of Islam: the Id al-Fitr, which marks the end of the Muslim month of fasting (Ramadan); the Id al-Adha, or "feast of the sacrifice," coterminous with the annual pilgrimage (*haj*) to Mecca and commemorating the story of the prophet Ibrahim's willingness to sacrifice his son at God's command.

Even though Bengali Muslims are Sunnis, they also observe the festival of Muharram, Usually associated more prominently with the Shia division of Islam, in which the death of Hussain, grandson of the Prophet Mohammed and martyr of the faith, is mourned. Bengalis also celebrate the well-known Hindu rite of spring called Holi; for members of all religious faiths, the annual new year ceremony on the first day of the Hindu (and Bengali) month of Baisakh, coming between April and May and marking the onset of spring, is a joyous occasion.

Urban Bengali elite culture has produced one of South Asia's finest literary traditions, including not only the novel, short story, and poetry but drama

and film as well. Some of India's best classical musicians and greatest exponents of the dance have been Bengalis. Bengalis have also made major contributions to Indian and world cinema. Rural Bengal has an old and well-developed folk literature, including narrative poetry (*puthi*), drawn from history, myth, and legend, as well as a very popular itinerant theater (called *jatra*).

DISCUSSION

There is also a strong tradition of religious folk music, particularly associated with the more devotional and mystical practices of popular Hinduism (e.g., worship of the goddess Kali and the Lord Krishna) and of popular Islam (e.g., the devotional gatherings of the various Sufi orders).

Terra-cotta temple and mosque architecture throughout Bengal is much admired, and there is a folk tradition of painting, seen in Hindu religious scrolls and in the flowery, and often obscure, religious symbols (*alipana*) commonly daubed in white rice paste on the walls and floors of homesteads by Hindu village women. Finally, despite industrialization and the spread of commercially manufactured products throughout the region, the Bengali rural economy still depends on the services of traditional craftspeople—weavers, potters, carpenters, blacksmiths, metalworkers, and the like—whose wares often represent a high quality of both technique and aesthetic design.

Although modern scientific medicine has long been known and accepted in Bengal, the homeopathic, allopathic, and the Hindu Ayurvedic and Muslim Unani medical traditions continue to exist as alternatives. There also remains a host of folk beliefs and curing practices among both the urban immigrant poor and the peasantry as a whole. Folk healers (*ojhaorfakir*) are commonly called upon to treat everything from temporary illnesses and chronic diseases to bone fractures and snakebite, as well as to counteract ethnopsychiatric afflictions resulting from sorcery and ghost possession.

Folk curing practices stress the use of magical verses (*mantras*), often combined with indigenous medicinal concoctions. Traditional healers also provide amulets for protection against devilry and sorcery, the wearing of which is ubiquitous not only among the peasantry and the urban poor but also among the Bengali middle classes as well.

Bengali Hindus, of course, accept the doctrine of *samsara*, or the transmigration of souls from one earthly life to another. Funerary cremations, practiced by nearly all Hindu castes, are thought to release the individual's spiritual essence or soul from its transitory physical body. Bearing the influence (*karma*) of all the actions of its just terminated earthly embodiment, the soul then is reincarnated into a new

worldly form and way of life shaped by those past actions.

Normally a man's eldest son carries out the funerary rites, lighting the funeral pyre after first placing a burning stick in the mouth of the deceased. Muslim beliefs require that at death the person be ritually bathed, shrouded, and buried in a coffin with the head facing the holy city of Mecca, after which there follows a funerary prayer ceremony ideally led by either a relative or a recognized leader of the local Muslim community.

CONCLUSION

The dead are thought to enter an indefinite transitional state—during which the wicked begin to Experience punishment and the virtuous to receive their reward—between time of death and an eventual Day of Destruction, upon which the world will come to an end.

There will then be a Day of Judgment, whereupon all beings will be restored to life, and humans will be brought before God (Allah) to have their lifetime deeds—which have been recorded by Allah's angels in a Great Book—reviewed and counted. Should one's good deeds outbalance the evil one has done, Resurrection Day will lead to everlasting life in Heaven; if vice versa, the outcome is a purifying, remedial period in Hell, whereupon, purged of its past iniquities, the soul may qualify for entry into Paradise.

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