

# Popular Traditional Culture of Bengalis in North-East India: A Case Study.

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## Abstract

North-Eastern region in India consists of seven sisters along with one host brother and is one of the most beautiful regions in India. It is the easternmost region which represents both geographic and political administrative division of the country. It comprises eight states – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura.

The people of North – East region are well known for its distinct culture. Each and every people of these states have its own culture, languages, dress, custom, festivals, folk song, folk dance, food and crafts.

*Key Words: Traditions, Language, Diverse Culture, Occasions, Festivals.*

## 1. Introduction

‘North-Eastern Region is the easternmost region in India comprising eight states i.e., Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. The region is paradise on earth with natural beauty of flora and fauna. It has distinct culture and traditional life style. The region offers a mixed culture of Hindu, Christianity, Muslim and Buddhism. Life style of these States varies from one-place to other. Each and every communities of this region are rich in their traditional culture, festivals, food, dance, music and handicrafts which are their

integral part of life. Ultimately the Bengali people of North Eastern region are full of adventure, diverse culture and lovable people.

The Bengalis of the North-East region are of diverse origin. They entered this region over the course of many centuries. The Bengali people speak Bangla dialects. They belong to the Indio-Aryan group of the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family.

These Bengalis migrated to this region from Bangladesh or East Bengal during 1947 and 1971 wars at large and scattered to different parts of this region. Bengali traditions and cultures have a wide horizon. These traditions evolve from social structure, life-style and place of origin or location. Some of the important traditions are Aalta, jonmodine payes, Dorpon e Bisorjon 14 shak, Aiburo bhat, Ostomangala, Ambubachi, Bhiksha Ma, Basanti Durga Puja, Tusu Puja, Bhadu Ruja, Poush Sankranti.

## **2. Bengali communities of North East India**

The Bengali communities of North Eastern Region in India are called Bangaals as they are originating from East Bengal. After the partition of East Bengal many people from Bangladesh moved to North-Eastern Region seggregating in different parts of India like Tripura, Barak valley or Cachar, Karimganj, Assam and very few in West Bengal. Their way of speaking is Bangladeshi accent and food preparation habits are different from native Bengali's of Kolkata apart from subtle cultural difference.

The Bengalis in Barak Valley of Assam and Northern Tripura are called Sylheti Bengalis as most of them are migrated from the Sylhet district of Bangladesh and their dialect is siloti. Apart from that there are East Bengalis too who are migrated to this North-Eastren Region from Comilla, Noakhali Feni of Bangladesh. Most of them are settled in Eastern and Southern part of Tripura and their dialect is

different from the Silhoti people. Bengali culture is the main non-tribal culture in the state.

## 2.1 Religion:

Bengalis in India are mainly Hindu, Muslims and very few percentages of Buddhists. Hindu Bengalis are Vaishnavas, Shaivas, and Shaktas. Vaishnavas are followers of the Hindu God Vishnu and believe that Krishna is the Supreme God an incarnation of Vishnu. Some Bengali Hindus are followers of Shaivas i.e., Shiva. Shaktism is based on the worship of female energy i.e., worship of ‘Mahishasurmardini Durga’ and ‘Goddess Kali’. Bengali Hindus observe Holi, Diwali and other important religious festivals like Durga Puja, Bhai Phota and many more.

Most Bengali Muslims belong to the Sunni Sect and they celebrate Eid-al – Fitr, Eid –al – Adha (Bakr –Eid), and Muhharram.

## 2.2 Living Conditions:

Living conditions of rural area vary widely. In the interior houses are made of mud, bamboo and brush wood. Roofs are thatched. Next came house made of half-cement-wall, half bamboo wall and corrugated tin-sheets. Presently prosperous Bengalis use corrugated iron. Urban Bengali people enjoy all the modern conveniences of city living. Bengalis have two types of ceremonies mainly religious and social.

## 2.3 Family Life:

Hindu Bengalis believe in Caste system. Usually four major casts – Bahmanas, Khasatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. But many sub-casts also exists such as Nama-Shudra and Shukla Das etc. These caste systems also determine their place in society to which people born, who they can marry, kinds of education, employment opportunities they will have. Casts are unchangeable.

Marriages are arranged and governed by the rules of caste.

In contrast, Muslims have no caste restrictions, although marriage partners are usually chosen from families of similar social standing. Monogamy is the usual type of marriage and kanya-dan is the usual means. Cousin marriage is common among Bengali Muslims.

In Tripura, Bengali speaking people are found in almost all corners. From the festivals to the beliefs they are influencing the society with their culture.

## 2.4 Clothing/Dress:

Traditional Hindu Bengali men or village people wear dhoti, the long piece of white cotton cloth that is wrapped around the waist, and then drawn between the legs in the manner of loincloth. Village men usually go shirtless but on occasion they put on a vest or a long shirt called Punjabi.

Hindu women wear the Sari and blouse whereas Muslim men wear the lungi, a piece of cloth that is wrapped around the waist. Muslim women wear 'Saluar Kamiz.

Gold ornaments are preferred by Hindu and Muslim women during various occasions.

In modern days, Safari suits or western style business Suits are common. Younger urban women may also dress in western fashions, but Sari is retained for formal occasions.

## 2.5 Food:

Among rural Bengal boiled rice is more common which is eaten with vegetables such as spinach, onion, garlic, gourds according to the season. Fish and meals are favourite foods which are prepared spicy. They also eat ducks, chickens and eggs in addition to fish.

Upper classes dishes include pilaf and biryani. Milk is an important element in the diet. Milk based sweets are also popular throughout the region. Shutki (dried fish) is loved by Bangaals of this region.

## 2.6 Cultural Heritage:

Bengalis have one of the richest literary traditions in India subcontinent. The earliest known works in Bengali are Buddhist books dated back to the tenth and eleventh centuries. Islam also contributed to medieval Bengali literature.

Modern Bengali literature is recognized worldwide. They have also achieved great success in the field of art and dance.

Recreational activities among Bengalis vary widely. Villagers derive greatest pleasure from fair and religious festivals such as jatra, bhatiyali songs, baul songs.

## 2.7 Crafts and Hobbies:

The folk arts and crafts of Bengal reflect the diversity of its people. They produced hand printed textiles, embroidered quilt-work, terra cotta dolls, toys and religious dolls.

Religious designs includes alpana during laksmi puja are prepared by Hindu women on walls, floors and courtyards out of rice paste.

The craftspeople also pursue brass metal work, idols using muds during festivals, pottery, weaving, basketry, carpentry etc.

## 2.8 Festivals:

There are numerous festivals celebrated throughout the year with great bomb and gaeity. Festivas in Bnegali communities are of two types – (i) Religious Festival (ii) Social Festival.

### 2.8.1 Religious Festival:

The Bengali Hindus of North-Eastern Region and also of west Bengal worship various deities. Therefore, a proverb is there that thirteen festivals in twelve months. During foreign subjection of thirteenth centures has left many a wood diseased and dead. Many reformers and saints like Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1533), Sri



Ramakrishna (1836-1886), Sri Ram Thakur (1860-1949), Prabhu Jagatbandhu (1871-1922), Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), Sri Keshav Hadgwar (1889 – 1940) and Swami Pranabananda (1896-1941) did a lot to clear the mind of the society. So, they are also worshipped.

Among important religious festivals are ‘Gajan Nritya which is a ritualistic and ubiquitous dance. It is associated with the worship of Siva and annually performed during the Indian month Chaitra (March-April). The idea behind it was supplication to the Sun-God for rain, light and good crops. But the dance is not an agricultural dance instead it is like kathak of Northern India and the Katha Kali dance of Malabar coast of Southern India. The themes of this dance are the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Shiva – Durga and the Radha – Krishna legend. Praying lord Shiva for the redress of local problems finds which has got poetic expression. The young and energetic boys dress themselves like Siva, Durga, Kartik, Ganesh, Radha, Krishna, Ram, Lakshman, Sita, Kali, Dakini, Jogini, Hanuman and the like. They come out in the evening to display their art in the form of song, play on flute, beat drums, and blow cunch – shell.

Another biggest religious festival of Bengali community is Durga Puja. Which is celebrated during Aswin month? It is untimely awakening of Goddess Durga as Ramachandra invoked her. The Puja is performed for consecutive three days i.e., seventh, eighth and ninth and immersion of the image of Goddess Durga with her companions is held on the tenth day. To the Bengali Hindus, Durga is considered a daughter who comes on naiyor to the paternal house with children for three days.

On the following full- moon day. Laxmi Puja takes place. On the lastday of the Bengali month of Kartik, Kartik Puja of God Kartik is performed who is the commander in chief of heavenly forces. During the month of Magh on the fifth lunar day Saraswati Puja is held. Before that in the month of Kartik on full Amavasya Kali Puja is also performed. Before starting Puja to any other God or Goddess, it is the

usual practice to offer Puja to Ganesha, so during the first day of Baisakha because without pronouncing 'Om Ganesha Namah' no puja to the other deities becomes efficacious. Thus, series of Pujas, which start in Baisakha with Lord Ganesha come to an end with Saraswati.

Pous Sankranti is another important festival of the Bengali which they celebrate in the month of mid January. During this festival people worship the Sun-God at the advent of his Northward journey. During this occasion Mela is also held in different parts of the region. It is a harvest festival in which freshly harvested paddy and date palmsyrup is used in the preparation of variety of traditional Bengali sweets made with riceflour, coconut, milk and khejurer gurand known as Pitha.

Rathyatra of Lord Jagannath is celebrated in the month of Asada where images of Jagannath are set upon the chariots and pulled through the streets. The week is synonymous with numerous fairs. It has an ancient culture in Assam, Manipur and Tripura in the Northeast and Bengal in the East inspite of having its origin at Puri, Odissa.

Bengali Muslims also celebrate thus important festival namely Eid and Iduzzoha. Eid marks the end of fasting period during the holy month of Ramzan. On this very day they celebrate exchange greetings, distribute charity and gifts. Muslim males gather for Eid prayers in Mosques.

On Iduzzoha goats and cows are sacrificed and the meat is distributed among family members, poors and neighbours.

In Muharram processions of tazias are taken out in the city.

### **2.8.2 Social Festivals:**

Various Social Festivals like Dhamail Nritya, Shubho Annaprasan, namkaran Shindur khela in Durga Puja, Bhai Phota etc, also have a distend flavor having their own way to mark these traditions.

Dhamail Nritya is celebrated by the Sylheti Hindus who made their settlements in large number in the Barak valley of Southern Assam and in Northern parts of Tripura. This is celebrated on the last day of Magha i.e., Middle of February and is called Magha Mandalar vrata. It is also celebrated during marriage ceremony.

In this dance boys and girls, males and females aged and young may participate. They slant in a circle, move, gyrate, rock forward and backward, play on symbols and sing songs. The main emphasis is on feet, waist and hands.

Sindoor Khela is one of the much awaited ceremonies of Bengali married women on the last day of Durga Puja. First of all vermilion is offered at Ma Durga's bunt and on forehead which is called Boron then they start playing by applying it on the foreheads and on the Shanka and Pola. Unmarried and widows are not allowed to attend the program.

“Annaprashan” is the first solid feeding ceremony usually performed when a newborn girl is in her fifth seventh and ninth month and a newborn boy is in his sixth eighth and the tenth month. It is performed at home or temple on an auspicious date. Payesh or sweet rice is prepared and oil lamps are lit to purify the atmosphere. The child is dressed in traditional dress seated on the maternal uncle's lap who feeds him a spoon of the payesh. The other elders do the same and bless the little one to have a healthy, happy life.

On the occasion of 'Bhai Phota' sisters pray to the God for long and prosperous lives of their brothers. It is celebrated two days after the popular festival of Diwali.

'Upanayan' or Paita is an important religious ritual in our society performs only for Brahmin boys. It is also called second birth for them which makes the beginning of brahmacharya. Brahmin child shaves his hair to worship Brahma and to recite Gayetri Mantra which gains inner strength.



‘Namkarana’ ceremony Celebrates with a bang and boost. Bengalis have a unique custom of putting names under each lighted diyas. The diya which will stay without going off till the last should be taken as the best name for baby.

### 3. Conclusion:

Thus, from the above study we have found that the Bengali community is enriched by myths and legends. Bengali people of the North-Eastern Region are originally of Bangladesh, origin and practice various occupations which include agriculture, fishing, business, gardening, horticulture, plantation, poultry, industry, weaving and white collar jobs. The culture and traditions of this people represents a fine blend of traditional and contemporary aspect. From the festive to the beliefs Bengalis have a major contribution.

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