

# The Rural Culture of Domjur in West Bengal: A Way of Life

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## ABSTRACT

The paper presents a microcosm of the traditions that make India unique, they combine religion, society, celebration of nature and the environment. Rural India is a treasure trove of sustainability and conservation practices, combined with cultural activities so that the message is carried from generation to generation and spread to other regions as well.

India prides itself upon adoration of nature and life, offering worship at festivals, observing vows for the betterment of humanity, performing religious rites and organising fairs to mark various phenomena. There are separate trends in various parts of the country, which may be the outcome of the fixing of administrative boundaries, but one thread runs common amongst all these. They bring together large groups of communities together, create social skills and human bonding, while showcasing various arts and handicrafts, along with traditional knowledge, healing and wholesome entertainment. As has been aptly said by a social commentator, “Centering round these festivals these have been the growth of various customs, sacrament of purification and local thoughts and perceptions.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, as nature plays a very important part in the Indian Sanatani culture, it is utilised as a symbol for rituals, for improvement and for cleansing in various forms.

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Notwithstanding changes evident in these modes with the passage of time, the manners and customs and also diversities of all festivals still survive in many cases all over the country, underlining the fact that they are based on a very deep rooted sense of identity, of the way a certain people look at themselves and bring out their best. This rich and diverse rural culture, pointed out in surveys all over the country, has marked the birth of brilliant and typical characteristics of festival celebration and fairs in various parts of the country, various regions of India. A few notable ones are stated as follows:

**Bastar Dussehra (Tribal Festival)**

- Region: Bastar, Chhattisgarh
- Some of the unique aspects and Key Festivities:
- Unlike the typical urban Dussehra, this rural and tribal version is a 75-day-long festival dedicated to local deities. The event includes processions of tribal deities, folk dances, and rituals very precious to the tribal communities. A rural fair is set up, where villagers sell handicrafts, forest produce, and traditional food items, offering a glimpse into the tribal lifestyle.

**Vaikunta Ekadashi and Rural Temple Fairs**

- Region: Rural Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh

Some of the unique aspects and Key Festivities:

- Vaikunta Ekadashi is marked by all-night prayers and celebrations at rural temples dedicated to Lord Vishnu. Temporary fairs are set up around temples, selling traditional cuisine, sweets, flowers, and handicrafts. Devotional singing (bhajans) and folk dances are performed, creating a spiritual and festive atmosphere.

Bengal being no exception, a fair that attracts international attention is the Gangasagar Mela (Pilgrimage Fair)

- Region: Sagar Island, West Bengal

Some of the unique aspects and Key Festivities:

- This fair is held during Makar Sankranti, attracting thousands of rural pilgrims who come to take a holy dip at the confluence of the Ganges and the Bay of Bengal.
- The mela features temporary markets selling rural handicrafts, local food, and religious items.

- Folk performances, including Baul songs (a traditional Bengali music form), and storytelling sessions are popular attractions.

With such a diverse picture in mind, we need to discuss the common cultural, civilisational thread that runs through all such celebrations, and also discuss how important Domjur is in upholding this vital Sanatani tradition.

### Concepts and Perceptions :

To draw a pen - picture of the religious life of the Bengalis in ancient times involves the arduous task of understanding the complex cultural fabric that has always existed in Bengal. Human life, when based on religion and common social practices, is much more complex as the everyday practical existence has so many practices that have socio religious connotations. All ancient societies of the world are bound to be close knit and clannish making their life not very easy to understand for modern commentators or analysts, though for them, it would be very simple and mundane. That is why it is imperative that we keep an open mind while observing these activities, and look at them with a trust and respect for communities. Any new faith or sacrament of offering worship seldom gains primacy in a society on a whim or without a certain thought process; behind each of this, there lie hidden perceptions, practices and rituals followed for quite long durations of time.

In a long history of contact among various groups, different strata, devotions and faiths of different people it gets generally concealed that history takes merely a shape of contemporary period after passing through evolution in course of time. Contemporary social thoughts and awareness as well as contemporary social class and strata develop due to various decisions, individual as well as collective, of the past. Again no classified or clannish faith or sacrament is confined within the fold of merely that class or clan forever. Consequent upon the interaction of mutual contact with other classes and clans, layers and sub layers and in accordance with the strength and weight of that contact, the ideas and the perceptions, beliefs, performances etc. of a class and clan, layers and parts are infused in other classes and clans and layers and parts and out of quick or long mingling and conflict are born continuously new ideas and perceptions, devotion, belief, performance etc.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Dipankar Ghosh, 'Dharma Samanwayer Bhumi, Gangar Pashchim Kul', Anandabazar Patrika (Supplement), Editor - Avik Sarkar, A. B. P. Private Limited, pp. 14 -15

<sup>2</sup>Nihar Ranjan Roy, *Dharmo Karmo Dhyana Dharona, Bangali Itihaser Adi Parbo*, Dey's Publishing, First Edition, 1356 (Bengali Year), p. 477

That is why it is imperative to study these themes of local folk culture entwined with religion, art, to form a way of life over the ages, to truly understand and appreciate the history of a particular region. Taking up Domjur, we investigate the facts regarding popular gods and goddesses, various festivals, rituals, community events, cultural activities, keeping in view trends prevailing in and very unique to Bengal.

### Popular Gods and Goddesses:

A look at history reveals that as the goddess of trade and commerce of the merchants the popular Chandi shrines are found in the riverside region of all places of the district of Howrah. In a poetical work named Chandimangal, a wealthy merchant fell in distress because of his pride, rejecting the blessings of the Chandi and refusing to offer pujas to the said goddess. When the wrath of the goddess fell upon him, he realised his mistake and after offering worship to said goddess, he was released from the curse of the goddess. Here, the goddess is worshipped as Malai Chandi, Betai Chandi, Gajai Chandi, Yugal Chandi, Jay Chandi, Chamunda and Makar Chandi.<sup>3</sup>

### Makardaha Makar Chandi Temple and Chand Sadagor's Hearsay:

At present, the old Ma Makar Chandi temple stands near Makardaha market beside Howrah Amta Road. Chand Sadagor, while passing through this river, disembarked here as per the hearsay and local storytellers. It is the closing years of the fifteenth century, none of the geographical and political frontiers of the then Bengal has been specifically demarcated. This land presents a veritable picture of both formation and break up of the kingdoms like the flowing stream of a river. In 'Mansa Vijaya', a poetical work Bipradas Piplai says -

“Her eastern shore leads to Calcutta  
Chand commanding a host of  
Charioted fighters anchors off  
His boat in Betore.”

Afterwards, in the mid sixteenth century, Kabikankan Mukundaram Chakraborty avers the same thing also in his poetical work *Chandi Magal*:

“He rows his boat without for a minute and avoids moving through Chitpur, Salkia and Calcutta. He touches Betore at dusk.”

In the account of Bipradas, Chand, the merchant, in his undertaking voyage for trade and commerce from Burdwan would move through the stream of Bhagirathi and thereafter turn towards the sea. On

<sup>3</sup>Tapan Kumar Sen, 'Howrah Jelar Mandir Puja Utsab, Mela', Prabha Prakashani First Edition 2009 Kolkata p. 230

completion of his puja to the Chandi, he would sail for the waterways of the vast expanse of the sea. Here, he offered worship to a deity and set out on a journey. Long ago, a person named Rameshwar Chaudhury had a landed estate in Makardaha. He had set himself to worshipping the goddess Makar Chandi. Thereafter, in the history of times, it was the Kundu Chaudhurys of Mahiyari who purchased this landed estate.

Sri Ramkanto Kundu, an illustrious son of an aristocratic landowning family planned the present temple of Makar Chandi goddess, to be built in the Bengali year 1228. Even today, standing at the doorsteps of twenty first century, the family of the Chaudhuris continue to provide for the expenses of daily religious rites, as well as special festivities, to a great extent. The temple also gets generous offerings from the local population and also from devotees coming to worship the goddess from all over Bengal, who have heard about the benevolence of the goddess.

#### **Fair Adjacent to Makardaha Chandi Temple:**

An image of the goddess Chandi carved out of a rock is situated in a *garbhagriha* within a larger foyer popularly known as the natmandir. This temple of the goddess of Makar Chandi is almost 1000 years old. According to the traditional custom, during the period of annual worship of the goddess Makar Chandi, a fair is held for a fortnight, continued since time immemorial and this is an example of the old tradition of Bengal. After the festival of Holi in the Bengali month of Phalgun, the *dol* of the goddess Makar Chandi is held on the fifth lunar day. This fair continues to be held onwards from the Bengali year 1252.<sup>4</sup>In the Anandabazar Patrika of 29<sup>th</sup> Phalgun in 1367 B.S. Bibhuti Mukhopadhyay asserts that centered round the festival of Dol of the goddess Makar Chandi, the fair of Makardaha, one of the earliest and most renowned ones of Howrah continues, for a fortnight. Various cottage industry products of the different regions of Howrah are brought in this fair. Yet, in this fair, the mat artisans outnumber others. Muslim men and women are parties to this fair. They equally share with the Hindus the joy of this fair. In fact, this characteristic is very unique to the Sanatani way of life in India. Most of the Hindu festivals are community based, so all groups are welcome to join in and be part of the festivities. Apart from the fifth Dol, festivals like winter solstice of Makar Sangkranti, the Hindu festival of Jugannatha going in a chariot for a sea bath or Ratha Yatra etc. are held in this Makar Chandi temple. This festival draws a large crowd. The

<sup>4</sup>Tapan Kumar Sen, Ibid., p. 195

professional practice of narrating scriptural and mythological stories or *Kathokatha*, a class of Bengali poems celebrating the glory of a deity and often set to music which is known as *Panchali*, are arranged.<sup>5</sup> On the whole, standing today at the doorsteps of twenty first century, and centring round the historic and old goddess Makar Chandi in the history of socio rural religious culture from the Bengali year 1252 to till date, Makardaha is always throbbing with a festive flair and geity.

A major attraction of the Makar Chandi fair is making a display of fireworks. From far off places, thousands of people flock around there to see the display of fireworks around the temple of the goddess Makar Chandi, it has been in vogue for long. As per old convention, three pitchers made of brass are kept in an open space. The fireworks are not set to fire until and unless the three pitchers are filled in by the contributions of the devotees.<sup>6</sup> It is a symbol of the devotees offering their gratitude to the deity for filling their homes with prosperity and the benediction of the deity in the form of light in the darkness.

There recurs the lustre of fireworks when the pitchers are found to be thoroughly replete. Three days after the fifth Dol, the food offering made to the Mother goddess Makar Chandi takes place. Thousands of people consume this *bhog*. This festival concerning a stupendous heap of boiled rice offered to the Mother is held with pomp and grandeur. That there has been a gradual growth in interest about the fair which has been continuing for epochs has been disclosed by respected Kalikristo Chattopadhyay, presently engaged in offering daily prayers.<sup>7</sup>

#### **Worship of Trees:**

Worships of trees, natural and matrilinear objects, the Kshetropal or the boundary keeper, along with the village god has always been held in many rural areas of the country and also in rural Bengal. The worship of the tulsi plant in India is a unique blend of spiritual devotion, cultural tradition, and ecological awareness. It represents the deep connection between nature and spirituality in Hindu philosophy, symbolizing the belief that the divine is present in all aspects of the natural world. The tulsi plant is not only a sacred symbol but also a vital part of daily life in Indian households, embodying the values of purity, health, and devotion. Similarly it is the Banyan tree, the mango tree, the Ashok tree have special significance

<sup>5</sup>Anandabazar Patrika, Dipankar Ghosh, Ibid., Supplement, p. 18

<sup>6</sup>Tapan Kumar Sen, Ibid., p. 196

<sup>7</sup>Interview, Kalikristo Chattopadhyay, the priest of the Makardaha Temple, Dol Purnima, 2018



when they are planted around temples and the periphery of villages.

The Ashoka tree is revered in Hinduism not just for its mythological associations and ritual significance, but also for its symbolic meaning of joy, fertility, and renewal. Its connection with divine figures, healing properties, and cultural presence highlight its integral role in the spiritual and everyday life of the Hindu community. The Ashoka tree is a living embodiment of the belief that nature is intertwined with spirituality, offering comfort and solace to devotees across generations. Centering round these places of worship outside the settlement and at the periphery of the village, various places of pilgrimage have developed in different areas of Bengal. The earliest Bengali literature contains some accounts of worship of these trees and rural gods and goddesses. Regarding the worship of the banyan tree, there is a sloka by poet Gobardhan Acharya -

*Twayee kugram boishrabanye basatu ba lakshou*

*Pamarakuthar patat kasor shir soibato raksha*

In other words, - O Banyan tree of the village Kugram, whether or not Boishrabanye (Kuber) or Lakshmi resides in you only/ It is only the chastisement of the horns of the buffalo that protects you from a stroke of axe of the people of Suryagram.<sup>8</sup>

The banyan tree is the Symbol of Knowledge and Enlightenment: The expansive branches of the banyan tree represent spreading knowledge and wisdom. It is often seen as a symbol of the guru (teacher) who provides shade and guidance to seekers of truth.

Metaphor for the Universe: In the Bhagavad Gita, the banyan tree is used as a metaphor for the cosmic tree of life, representing the universe itself. The tree's roots, which grow downward and also extend upward, symbolize the interconnectedness of all life and the cyclical nature of existence.

Symbol of Strength and Stability: Due to its extensive root system and longevity, the banyan tree is seen as a symbol of strength, resilience, and stability. Its ability to withstand harsh conditions and continue growing makes it a metaphor for endurance and the everlasting presence of the divine.

### **Narna Panchananda Temple:**

A brilliant example of an old traditional rural culture in West Bengal is Panchanandatala, a place of the god. Baba Panchananda made his appearance as a God of fear and devotion beneath a banyan tree in Narna village lying at the terminal point of the district of Howrah and at a distance of five miles from

Domjur. This place is frequented by the devotees throughout the year. Especially, in the Bengali month of Choitra, the ascetics of the *Gajan* and the populace of different districts of West Bengal come to receive the blessings of Narna Panchananda Baba by way of holding a scarf or *gamcha* on their throats and wearing new clothes. In the history of rural folk culture of Bengal, taking to asceticism by way of holding this unique cotton weave is new and strange indeed. It is an incident which has been continually occurring round the Panchananda temple.

A fair takes place on the occasion of either a function or a puja in a week or a gathering on a fixed day of a month or year. In such fairs associated with religious festivals, there are various scriptural rites. Narna Panchananda upholds scriptural rites in its own way. This fair is widely prevalent in each district of West Bengal through the *Gajan*. Worships of both banyan tree and offering religious rites on the occasion of *Neel* and *Charak* in fairs are carried on. People insert spikes in your mouth and backs and run around chanting the name of Shiva. Charak Puja is also about the test of human strength and faith that makes people do incredible things. Inflicting pain, swinging on the trees with hooks, even walking on coals are attempted to signify the pain of Mother Earth to give us food and sustenance. Some also say that such acts are a form of role reversal for men who try to attempt to experience the pains of womanhood, including childbirth.

Many men from Howrah, Hooghly, Burdwan, Midnapore, Kolkata, North and South 24 Parganas take part in Narna Panchananda Baba's place and also in the fair. Many take a vow before the Baba for the fulfilment of their desire. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> Boishakh a new pitcher of Narna Panchananda Baba is installed. The fifth *Dol* festival of Panchananda is held on the day of Buddha Purnima.<sup>9</sup> In this fair too, mesmerising fireworks are always part of the celebration.

### **Conclusion**

Rituals, traditions, worship going back thousands of years are the hallmark of Indian culture, and the culture of Bengal is no exception. The complex socio cultural, socio economic patterns of existence here, where agrarian societies, international trade, performing art, visual art and handicrafts conglomerate together, give us a picture that's rich, colourful, vibrant and the very essence of the best that humanity can offer. It is vital that we preserve, conserve, revere and highlight such golden nuggets of human civilisation.

<sup>8</sup>Nihar Ranjan Roy, Ibid., p. 482

<sup>9</sup>Tapan Kumar Sen, Ibid., p. 196

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