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Cultural Currents: Journal of South Asian Culture is the annual journal of the SAARC Cultural Centre, Sri Lanka dedicated to fostering scholarly dialogue on the diverse cultural dimensions of the South Asian region, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The journal provides a platform for academics, practitioners, policymakers, and experts to present research findings and engage in critical discussion on issues of shared and mutual interest.

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Contents

Guest Editor's Note	i
A Comparative Archaeological and Cultural Study of the Relic Traditions of Anuradhapura (Sri Lanka) and Gandhara (Pakistan) Adeel Sattar and Najma Amath	1
Buddhist Domestication in Pre-Islamic Maldives: Evidence from the 'Dan'bidū Lōmāfanu' and 'Kuḍahuvadū Lōmāfanu' Hassan Amir	27
Narrative Strategies and Spatial Storytelling: The Seventeenth-Century Murals of the Śivakāmasundari Shrine at Chidambaram Ramakrishnan Panchapakesan and Pallavi Nalawade Jambhale	49
The Weight of Laughter and Forgetting: Ghostly Occupancy and the Disghosted Self in the Works of Tarashankar Bandopadhyay Anuja Dutta	78
The Folklore and Cultural Memory of Bon Bibi and the Sundarbans: An Exploration of Ethnopoetics and Mythopoeic Fantasy in Amitav Ghosh's Jungle Nama Nahreen Saleha Shahadat	100
Staging Folklore and Feminism in Deconstructing the R/evolution of Bhadu in the Bengali Play <i>Bhadraja</i> (2018) Praggnaparamita Biswas and Anup Shekhar Chakraborty	126
What Has Heritage Got to Do with It? Understanding the Built Environment of Bodh Gaya's Foodscape Pooja Kalita and Aruna Jayasena	152
Echoes from Rawain: Tracing Continuity and Change in the Devlang Mela of Uttarakhand Manisha Singh Rajput, Surendra Singh Bisht and Tarun Kumar Bhatt	168

Cults, Customs and Cuisines: A Study of Food Offerings in South Indian Temples Sourav Sen	189
Edible Inheritance: Culinary Memory and Gendered Heritage Practices among Dogras in Jammu Region, India Mrinalini Atrey	211
William Dalrymple. <i>The Golden Road: How Ancient India Transformed the World</i> Chayanika Samanta	245
R. Mahalakshmi & Suchandra Ghosh (eds.). <i>The Economic History of India: Historiographical Issues and Perspective Essays in Honour of Professor Ranabir Chakravarti</i> Titas Sarkar	251
Mohan Mainali. <i>Mukam Ranamaidan</i> Rakesh Prasad Chaudhary	257
A Heart Outside the Heart: Japanese Sensibilities and Aesthetic Simplicity in Rabindranath Tagore's Santiniketan An interview with Nilanjan Bandopadhyay	262
Notes on Contributors	273

Guest Editor's Note

Editing a journal that has been established under the auspices of an intergovernmental body like SAARC presents a unique set of ethical and intellectual challenges. Unlike a purely independent academic journal, our mandate necessitates a careful balancing act: one must honour the spirit of regional representation while upholding an earnest commitment for standards of global scholarly merit. The 'intergovernmental' dimension often places the editor in a complex position, where the drive for inclusive representation from across the eight member states must be reconciled with the uneven landscape of institutional support for academic research, and research publication.

We have remained mindful that the 'scholarly' is never a neutral field; it is shaped by the material and political conditions/realities of each specific nation-state, and as well as by the material conditions of the academic institutions and the networks of academic relations and practices. Consequently, our selection process has been an exercise in 'representational excellence', wherein an attempt has been made to ensure that this volume serves as a true mirror of the region's diverse intellectual vitality, even as we acknowledge the inherent structural limitations that come with a journal of this nature. This volume seeks to be a site where the shared heritage of South Asia is critiqued and celebrated with equal measures of rigour and regional solidarity.

In assembling this collection, we have sought to promote scholarship that transcends the merely formulaic. This is a recurring challenge in contemporary academic writing, particularly within our regional context. There is a tendency to cling to the 'scaffolding' of research with headers such as 'Research Objectives', 'Literature Review', etcetera. While such headings are vital for the internal discipline of a research report or a thesis, they often act as barrier in academic essays, fragmenting the flow of persuasive argument. We have, where necessary, sought to dissolve these functional boundaries, allowing their objectives to emerge organically through integrated narrative. Furthermore, we remained wary of what might be termed 'theoretical stretching.' True interdisciplinary work requires more than the brief mention of a concept or the convenient mentioning of a theoretician's or a philosopher's name to a text. Theory should not be a procrustean bed into which we force our claims, and subjects; rather, it requires to be the lens through which the nuances of our material, and field experiences are brought onto sharper focus. Performative citation of theory remains a major

problem in the scholarship produced in some parts of our region, and some of the papers submitted for consideration to this volume were no exceptions in this regard.

The ten papers presented in this volume can be grouped under three broad thematics. The first thematic thread of this volume explores Material Religion and the ‘Glocalisation’ of Faith, where universal doctrines are grounded in specific regional realities. Adeel Sattar and Najma Amath offer an exemplary comparative study of relic traditions in Anuradhapura and Gandhara, utilising archaeological and textual analysis to show how Buddhist models were localised through a “glocalisation” process. This regional phenomenon is further echoed in Hassan Amir’s reconstruction of pre-Islamic Buddhist institutions in the Maldives, where he utilises the *Lōmāfanu* copper plates to describe the status of Buddhism in pre-Islamic Maldives. Complementing this material focus, Ramakrishnan Panchapakesan and Pallavi Nalawade Jambhale analyse the Chidambaram murals not as mere illustrations, but as autonomous narrative agents that structure the ritual and temporal experience of the shrine.

A second thread in this collection examines the Uncanny, Memory, and the Intangible, specifically how folklore and spectrality act as repositories for ethical imagination. Anuja Dutta’s rigorous investigation into the “disghosted self” in the works of Tarashankar Bandopadhyay provides a profound theoretical anchor, arguing that ghostly occupancy is a material condition that unearths modernity’s repressions through the lens of humour and risk. This is mirrored in the work of Nahreen Saleha Shahadat, who positions Amitav Ghosh’s *Jungle Nama* as a critical cultural artifact. By employing ethnopoetics and mythopoeic fantasy, Shahadat demonstrates how the Sundarbans’ oral traditions are revitalised into a universal moral norm for the contemporary ecological crisis. Furthering the limits of investigation into intangible, Praggnaparamita Biswas and Anup Shekhar Chakraborty, examine the nearly lost Bengali folk culture of ‘Bhadu’ through the play *Bhadraja*. Their work aligns with the volume’s broader interest in the political power of the intangible. They show how the evolution of Bhadu from a rural divinity to a figure of feminist resistance. This transformation underscores the political agency embedded within intangible heritage.

Finally, we turn to the ‘Foodscape’ as Material Heritage and the Contestations of Modernity, where heritage is viewed as a living, often marginalised practice. Pooja Kalita and Aruna Jayasena challenge the monumental view of Bodhi Gaya by foregrounding its “foodscape,” revealing how

neoliberal “gastrodevelopment” and global branding can displace local residents and informal vendors. Similarly, the work of Manisha Singh Rajput and colleagues on the Devlang Mela in Uttarakhand traces the elements of continuity and change in Himalayan festivals. Their analysis of how improved connectivity and outmigration transform local traditions serves as a vital reminder of the structural pressures facing regional identities today. The essays by Sourav Sen and Mirnalini Atrey present the complexity of culinary heritage in terms of its historical and social terms. Sen examines the symbolic dimensions of *naivedyam* (food offerings) in South Indian temples, demonstrating how ritual cuisine encodes complex hierarchies of caste, purity, and regional identity. Complementing this Atrey’s study of the Dogra community in Jammu frames culinary traditions as ‘edible inheritance,’ highlighting the gendered architecture of taste memory and forest-foraged ingredients as active vessels of ecological wisdom and community vitality.

Together, these ten essays reflect a South Asia that is not a static museum of the past, but a dynamic site of ongoing cultural negotiation, contestation, and uneven transformation. Most importantly, they reveal the transformative potential and the political acuity embedded within intangible heritage. Scholars are required to see heritage as a contested terrain and that most urgent and meaningful scholarship must now locate itself in this terrain.

Jagath Weerasinghe

Professor Emeritus, Postgraduate Institute of Archaeology
University of Kelaniya
Sri Lanka

A Comparative Archaeological and Cultural Study of the Relic Traditions of Anuradhapura (Sri Lanka) and Gandhara (Pakistan)

Adeel Sattar and Najma Amath

Abstract

This comparative research study, which is based on existing literature, investigates the construction and role of Buddhism's relic traditions in Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka, and Gandhara (now modern-day Pakistan), two relic veneration sites with different geographical and cultural contexts. This study utilises archaeological evidence, architectural investigations, and text analysis to consider how Buddha's universal belief doctrine on relic veneration developed in the local realm. This study identifies many similarities, in a foundational sense, of stupas being reliquaries and places of devotion, but also finds many differences in architecture, art, ritual elaboration, and sociopolitical roles. Beyond architectural analysis, this study examines the cultural dimensions of relic worship, including the theological frameworks, ritual practices, and the role of relics in shaping religious identity and devotion. This study uses the theoretical lens of material religion and an archaeological comparative methodology to assess the ways geography, political sponsorship, cultural matrices, and religious sects informed the changing relic traditions in both geographical regions. Findings indicate that despite the varying material remains of Buddhist relic traditions being based on shared theological ideas, which promoted the material experience of Buddha's ongoing presence, the glocalisation process yielded local expressions of this universal doctrine. The study fills academic gaps established in the literature through cross-comparative analysis, demonstrating how universal Buddhist models were localised at Anuradhapura and Gandhara. The study also contributes to larger understandings of Buddhism's transmission, the formation of regional identities, and the relationship between universal religious platforms and local cultures.

Keywords: Anuradhapura, Buddhist relics, Gandhara, Stupa architecture

Introduction

One of the most prominent and enduring practices among Buddhist traditions throughout the world is the veneration of Buddhist relics, which became an early and essential practice of devotion to the Buddha, and has remained a central focus of Buddhist religious life for over two thousand years (Strong 23). The origins of this practice come from the Buddha's deathbed instructions, in which he outlined exactly how his bodily remains should be distributed among followers after his cremation (Trainor 45).

In different cultural and geographic locations, two of the most prominent places of relic veneration were formed: Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka and Gandhara in the northwestern Indian subcontinent. Anuradhapura, founded as the capital of ancient Sri Lanka during the reign of King Pandukabhaya in the fourth century BCE, continued a continuous and unbroken tradition of Buddhist practice till this day (Mahanama et al. 34; Buddhist Channel). The Pāli chronicles, especially the *Mahāvamsa*, indicate that Buddhism infiltrated Sri Lanka during the reign of King Ashoka in the third century BCE. During this time, Ashoka sent his monk son Mahinda with a cutting from the Bodhi tree, establishing it as a sacred place of Theravāda Buddhism in Sri Lanka (Oldenberg 156; Sai).

Anuradhapura became “Sri Lanka's most sacred city” of Buddhist veneration, where the sapling of the Bodhi tree was planted and where many early Buddhist monasteries flourished as a major centre of Theravāda Buddhism with many monasteries and Buddhist memorials (Sai). Anuradhapura has several main relic casket structures, four important stupas, including the Thuparama, Ruvanvelisaya, Abhayagiri, and Jetavanarama stupas, which all contained precious relics and drew pilgrims throughout the history of Buddhism.

Conversely, Gandhara was situated at an important crossroads point in the three worlds of the Mediterranean, Central Asia, and India. Vidya Dehejia declares, “the ancient name of a region in northwest Pakistan; bounded on the west by the Hindu Kush Mountain Range and to the north by the foothills of the Himalayas”. The area had a rich cultural synthesis of Hellenistic, Persian, and Indian influences, particularly in the period of the Kushans (Dehejia). The region became well known for its unique Greco-Buddhist artistic tradition and served as an important site of Buddhist learning and pilgrimage, particularly in the Common Era from the first through the fifth centuries.

Despite Anuradhapura and Gandhara each garnering considerable individual academic interest, few studies explore both sites within the same analytic context in any systematic way. This knowledge void obfuscates significant knowledge about the transmission, adaptation, and integration of Buddhist doctrines into diverse contexts. Anuradhapura and Gandhara offer particularly fruitful comparative opportunities because they represent clearly divergent cultural matrices while each developing sophisticated Buddhist civilisations based on relic veneration.

This study draws on the Theory of Material Religions that stresses that the meanings of religion are constituted primarily through material objects, and sensorial engagements with those objects (Morgan 31). Practice theory emphasises that religious traditions are dynamic practices contingent on social contexts (Bourdieu 78). Sacred Geography Theory elucidates how relic sites became nodes of spiritual power (Turner 34). Political theology frames examine how religious practices serve to legitimate political authority (Tambiah 112). Finally, theories of cultural translations and glocalisation provide valuable interpretative frameworks for understanding why universal concepts in Buddhism manifested in different ways (Appadurai 22).

This study investigates how shared relic traditions developed differently in Anuradhapura and Gandhara, and what these divergences reveal about the localised adaptations of universal Buddhist values. To address this central question, the research aims to document and analyse archaeological evidence of relic veneration, compare architectural and artistic expressions, examine ritual practices and their sociopolitical functions, and explore the cultural and theological dimensions of relic worship as reflected in primary textual sources. It further seeks to understand how these traditions contributed to shaping religious identity and devotional practices within each region. The study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework: the theory of material religion highlights how religious meaning is constituted through objects and sensory engagement (Morgan 31); practice theory underscores the dynamic, socially contingent nature of religious traditions (Bourdieu 78); sacred geography elucidates the transformation of relic sites into loci of spiritual power (Turner 34); and political theology examines the role of religious practices in legitimising authority (Tambiah 112). Additionally, concepts of cultural translation and glocalisation (Appadurai 22) provide a lens to interpret the varied manifestations of shared Buddhist ideas across different cultural contexts.

Methodologically, the study adopts a literature-based comparative research design, employing thematic review and content analysis of existing scholarship, archaeological excavation reports, museum documentation, and primary textual sources. The comparative approach focuses on identifying parallel phenomena across the two regions while accounting for differences in form, function, and cultural meaning. Primary sources include Pāli chronicles such as the *Mahāvamsa*, *Dhātuvamsa*, and *Dīpavamsa*, as well as Sanskrit and Prakrit inscriptions from Gandharan sites, excavation reports from Anuradhapura, Taxila, Butkara, and related sites, and museum catalogues. These are complemented by secondary sources, including scholarly monographs and journal articles that contextualise the historical, cultural, and anthropological dimensions of Buddhist relic practices. Data collection and analysis rely on critical textual analysis to assess the reliability of chronicles, comparative analysis to evaluate shared and divergent features, and thematic analysis to organise evidence around key aspects such as construction, ritual performance, and sociopolitical significance.

Buddhist Relic Traditions

Studies by John Strong, particularly his detailed book *Relics of the Buddha*, suggested that the practice of relic veneration is a primary dimension of Buddhist practice, asserting that relics function as the material basis through which the presence of the Buddha is still experienced, and that relics serve as conduits of the salvific power of the Buddha, making it accessible to the practitioner community (Strong 12). Strong viewed the relic with reverence and full respect. Kevin Trainor in *Relics, Ritual, and Representation* similarly highlights the veneration of relics as an active part of life in the Buddhist tradition, suggesting that veneration of relics involves an advanced form of understanding and articulating theology about how material things mediate with the sacred (Trainor 56). Schopen's *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks* was really quite significant, if not a turning point, in stirring, or rather, shattering, capitalist and modernist frameworks informing Buddhist studies by demonstrating that monks, monastic practice, embodied practice, and devotion to relics do in fact capture a significant component of Buddhist life far beyond what critics presented and conventional scholarship presented (Schopen 89).

Relic Traditions of Anuradhapura

Anuradhapura has garnered significant interest from scholars due to its exceptionally well-preserved Buddhist remains. The Pāli chronicles, especially the *Mahāvamsa*, tell the story of the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka and the development of the major reliquaries (Mahanama *et al*, 78). Wilhelm Geiger's translation and commentary of the *Mahāvamsa* is still considered the standard for Buddhist history and legends of the development of Buddhism in Anuradhapura. Archaeological studies at Anuradhapura, particularly the excavations guided by Robin Coningham in the 1980s and 1990s, revealed a considerable amount of physical evidence of Buddhist devotional practices for almost two thousand years (Coningham 34). The Ruvanvelisaya Stupa, constructed under King Dutugamunu's reign at around 140 B.C.E., is a massive dome-shaped structure measured "338 feet high and 950 feet in circumference" (Sai). The stupa itself also used bricks of gold, the imaginatively named "gold bricks," placed along the sides, signifying the massive number of resources spent in the veneration of relics (Sai; Anne).

The Thuparama Stupa is another important relic centre measuring "59 feet around at the base" and constructed in a bell-shaped form rather than dome-shaped (Sai). The Sri Maha Bodhi, which is a cutting from the original fig tree that the Buddha sat under while attaining enlightenment, is now one of the holiest sites in the country of Sri Lanka (Sai; "Sacred Island: Anuradhapura"). Studies done on Anuradhapura's stupa architecture have shown the changes in Sri Lankan stupa forms, which were composed of immense amounts of brick, elaborately designed harmika, and detailed programs incorporating moonstones and other carved stone onto the stupas (Coomaraswamy 45). The architectural forms were created not only for their functional aspects but also as avatars of the cosmological implications of Buddhism, where the stupa represents the cosmic mountain but also the path to enlightenment (Frasch).

Gandhara Relic Traditions

Studies on Gandharan Buddhism have been dramatically shaped by archaeological excavations that began in the late 19th century with Sir John Marshall's systematic investigations at Taxila, which exposed and excavated a number of extensive monastic complexes, stupas, and votive deposits that provided a wealth of data regarding Buddhist worship and material culture (Marshall 234). The Metropolitan Museum of Art depicts that the centers of

Buddhism in Gandhara regularly consisted of “monastic housing next to a public sacred space that featured a stupa (a solid domed form) at its centre, which housed relics of the Buddha” (Vidya Dehejia). In some instances of reliquaries found at the site of Gandhara, inscriptions documented the specific donations. An example of this type of reliquary states, “a local prince, Indravarman, who in 5- 6 A.D. brought these relics of the Lord Shakyamuni in procession and then deposited them deep, so that merit could be earned, for his family and kingdom” (Vidya Dehejia).

According to The Metropolitan Museum, “the physical presence of the Buddha's relics was the primary site of lay and monastic veneration” and “these sacred spaces inhabited by relics supported the local population and were crucial pilgrimage sites.” Over time, these pilgrimage sites attracted donations that frequently were in the form of sculptural imagery. The unique artistic practice of Gandhara, the Greco-Buddhist synthesis of Hellenistic representational conventions and Buddhist iconographic prescriptions, has received, and continues to receive, much scholarly attention. The Metropolitan Museum notes that “stupas became adorned with narrative reliefs that depicted the miraculous life of the Buddha Shakyamuni and made reference to his physical presence at the site” (Vidya Dehejia). These artistic projects performed Buddhist narratives and ideas in a visual medium that was understandable to the ethnically varied population of Gandhara (Errington and Cribb, 145). Epigraphic research has revealed inscriptions on reliquaries and votive deposits across Gandhara, reflecting a range of donors, sectarian contexts, and theological ideas about relic worship (Baums 267; Gandhari Texts Project).

Relic Veneration in Anuradhapura: Archaeological and Cultural Evidence

Historical Context

Buddhism was formally brought to Sri Lanka during the reign of King Ashoka in the third century BCE when Ashoka's son, Mahinda, arrived, bringing a cutting of the Bodhi tree and beginning to preach Buddhism to the Sinhalese royal court (Mahanama et al. 67; Oldenberg, 178). This formal establishment of Buddhism under royal power set in motion a trend that has characterised the history of Sinhalese Buddhism: the close relationship between political power and religious institution (Buddhist Channel). Anuradhapura emerged as the royal capital and centre of the Theravāda Buddhist tradition, and multiple major stupas were built under royal sponsorship. This royal beginning ensured that the veneration of

relics in Sri Lanka developed under the umbrella of a state Buddhism, wherein state rulers exerted enormous resources to construct religious monuments (Frasch).

Key Relic Sites and Archaeology

The *Mahāvamsa* refers to Thuparama Dagoba as the earliest major Buddhist monument built in Sri Lanka after the official introduction of Buddhism. The chronicle, as well as modern travelers, indicate it was constructed to house the relic of the Buddha's collarbone that Mahinda brought from India (Mahanama et al, 89; Sai). It was "miraculously constructed in the shape of a bell instead of a dome" (Sai) and has a 'base width of 59 feet" (Sai).

Excavations at Thuparama provided evidence for at least several building episodes and renovations from the third century BCE to the medieval period (Coningham, 178). Among the finds in the excavations were deposits of bone fragments, along with votive materials, inside what is termed a relic chamber of the stupa, confirming the relic-related function.

Ruvanvelisaya stands as the largest of the stupas in Anuradhapura, capturing the magnificence of royal Sinhalese patronage of Buddhism. According to the *Mahāvamsa*, it was built by King Dutugamunu in the second century BCE after conquering the Tamil invaders (Mahanama et al. 134; Oldenberg, 201). Scholars today describe it as a "huge dome-shaped structure, dutifully known as a stupa, loved by Buddhists all over the world" that was built "around 140 B.C." that measured "338 feet high and 950 feet in circumference" (Sai). The dedication of the Raja came during the full moon day of what we referred to as Vesak or the months of April and May, including all the bricks of gold placed along the sides of the stupa (Sai).

Ruvanvelisaya demonstrates the monumental scale of Sinhalese royal stupas. Each stupa was made of millions of brick units and incorporated chambers for deposits of relics (Coningham 201). Written sources acknowledge financial support contributed from multiple sources, including royalty and wealthy merchants.

Abhayagiri and Jetavanarama are two other notable stupas built under royal patronage during the third and fourth centuries CE, respectively. Abhayagiri was established as part of a monastic complex and became one of the three major

divisions of the Sinhalese sangha (Coningham 145). Jetavanarama was built under King Mahasena, who represents “a structure which helps to represent the history of differences between the three types of Buddhism - Theravada, Mahayana & Tibetan” (Sai). The stupa is “400 feet in height, extremely tall” and it is “believed to shelter a piece of a belt that was worn by the Buddha” (Sai). Archaeological studies at Abhayagiri and Jetavanarama continue to show a connected monastic complex that includes residential quarters for monks, meditation halls, libraries, and shrines, show that the major stupas did not exist alone but were part of a complex and developing monastic community.

The Cultural and Theological Framework of Relic Veneration in Anuradhapura

The *Dhātuvamsa* looks at how Sinhalese Buddhists relate to relics, and organises this relationship into three associations: bodily, daily use or service, and memorial. The *Mahāvamsa* clearly indicates that relics have a theological role wherein they make visible the Buddha's presence and authority so that stupas become spiritual powerhouses. King Dutugamunu participated in the entombment of relics so as to authenticate his kingship by establishing it in accordance with the Buddha's power and authority. The religious ceremonies that were performed in Anuradhapura had elements of similarity with the royal coronation, and the concept was thus reinforced that relics are visible, present-day manifestations of the Buddha. Daily rituals, such as making offerings and circling the stupa, depict how one has a close, physical connection to the Buddha and his teachings. The *Mahāvamsa* narrative indicates that by preserving relics, Sri Lanka has protected the Dhamma, and therefore, it entwines the Sinhalese religious rites with their identity and land ownership.

Characteristics and Symbolism in Architecture

Sri Lankan stupa architecture ranks separately from other Buddhist regions' architectural traditions by deploying unique traits. The typical Sinhalese stupa is comprised of a hemispherical dome (*anda*) on a circular platform (*medhi*), and topped by a relic chamber (*harmika*) and finial (*chatri* or another finial). The architectural pattern remains consistent among Anuradhapura's major stupas, with differences in chronology.

The hemispherical dome signifies the cosmic mountain, or axis mundi, in Buddhist cosmological thought. The ritual paths of circumambulation often

surrounding stupas in Anuradhapura provided both symbolic and practical functions, allowing for devout circumambulation and forming the sacred space into hierarchy zones of holiness approaching the relic chamber (Frasch).

The ornamental designs on the stupas at Anuradhapura incorporate important symbolic components. The great size of Sinhalese stupas, especially Ruvanvelisaya and Jetavanarama, sets them apart from most of the stupas in Gandhara and embodies and emphasises ideas of permanence, stability, and the everlasting presence of the Buddha in his relics (Frasch).

Ritual Practices and Sociopolitical Functions

Extensive devotional ceremonies and ritual practices involving relics in Anuradhapura are documented in the *Mahāvamsa* and other Pāli sources. One major form of devotion involved spatially moving in a circle (*pradakshina*) around stupas, often performed by monks and laity individually and sometimes included within larger ceremonial events organised by the state (Mahanama et al, 145; “Sacred Island: Anuradhapura.”). Royal sponsorship of relic monuments performed significant legitimacy functions for the Sinhalese rulers; they engaged in a relationship with relics, defining themselves as protectors of Buddhism and patrons of the sangha to reinforce authority and legitimise their reign to their Buddhist subjects. The *Mahāvamsa* specifically details how Dutugamunu constructed the Ruvanvelisaya as a legitimating event in which the king displayed his piety (Oldenberg 207; Mahanama et al 156). Pilgrimage practices associated with relics in Anuradhapura became recognised religious practices in and of themselves, bringing devotees from all over the Buddhist world. Major stupas of Anuradhapura, especially the Thuparama and Ruvanvelisaya, became pilgrimage destinations that provided “direct encounter with the sacred”.

Relic Veneration in Gandhara: Evidence from Archaeology and Culture

Historical Background

Gandhara occupied a geopolitically vital place at the intersection of Mediterranean, Central Asian, and South Asian worlds. According to the Metropolitan Museum, “In 330 B.C., Alexander the Great conquered this region and together with the Indo-Greek kings who followed him, introduced classical traditions that became an important part of Gandhara’s artistic vocabulary for the next seven centuries” (Vidya Dehejia). The region then came under the rule

of “Indo-Greeks, Shakas, Parthians, Scythians, and finally, in the first century A.D, the Kushan dynasty” (Vidya Dehejia).

The Metropolitan Museum states, “Gandhara control of the high mountain passes crucial to this international commerce made the region prosperous; and the resulting cosmopolitan elites became some of the most influential patrons in all of South Asia”. As a result of such patronage, Buddhism flourished, with “most of the principal Buddhist center of Gandhara constructed during the second century A.D. through powerful kings like Kanishka” (Vidya Dehejia).

Major Relic Sites and the Archaeological Record

The Dharmarajika Stupa at Taxila is one of the most important relic sites in Gandhara. Taxila was a significant urban and monastic center for monks and scholars during the entire Buddhist period, and Sir John Marshall's discoveries at Dharmarajika were of complex structures at the main stupa which included votive stupas surrounding the main stupa, all with reliquaries and donations from individual devotees (Marshall 245).

In the relic chamber of the main stupa, Marshall's excavations unearthed intricate reliquaries made of stone, terracotta, and metal, all of which contained bone or ash remnants that were identified as relics of the Buddha. The reliquaries exhibited high-quality crafts, and many featured inscriptions in Kharoṣṭhī mentioning the name of the donor and the contents of the reliquary (Marshall 267).

Butkara Stupa in the Swat Valley offers some of the most detailed archaeological evidence of an enduring structure over time and architectural development at an archaeological site. The Italian archaeological mission led by Domenico Faccenna revealed several building phases from approximately the second century BCE to the sixth century CE (Faccenna 189). Takht-i-Bahi is a well-preserved monastic complex that incorporates several stupas, living quarters, meditation halls, and other buildings necessary for monastic life. This complex, now in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, showcases the incorporation of stupas into larger monasteries (Behrendt).

Gandharan Relics in Pakistani Museums: Material Evidence of Relic Culture

Most large museums in Pakistan exhibit a wide variety of Gandharan artefacts including caskets and reliquaries that reveal the process of relic veneration within ancient Gandharan culture. Among these are numerous examples at the Lahore Museum, including many reliquaries that were excavated from sites throughout Gandhara, which illustrate the artistry and theological significance of the reliquary as a container for relics. Near ancient Gandhara, the Peshawar Museum contains several significant caskets; among those is the gold Bimaran reliquary, which illustrates the coexistence of Greek and Indian artistic elements as well as the use of elaborate decoration and Buddhist imagery on an overall gold surface as an expression of the skillfulness of Gandharan artisans in producing sacred containers for Buddha's remains with religious importance.

Within the Taxila Museum located on the archaeological site are reliquaries as well as relics found in Marshall's excavations. Several inscribed stone caskets labelled as śarīra have been discovered and the inscriptions are written in Kharoṣṭhī and reveal the identity of those who donated the relics inside of them, many of whom were members of royalty, merchants, and lay practitioners from many different parts of the region where Gandhara was centred.

The Gandharan relics in the National Museum of Pakistan, Karachi, represent a significant aspect of religious and social practice in ancient India (Gandhara). The reliquaries range from crystal and stone to silver, copper, and various other materials; this demonstrates the diversity of relic veneration practices based on a variety of socio-economic factors.

The reliance on layered containers to protect the relics within them is apparent in many of the differing styles of reliquaries excavated from various sites. Each layer of the container was designed to show respect to the inner containers where the bone or ash fragments were kept. The bone fragments (śarīra-dhātu) discovered at Dharmarajika, Jaulian, and Mohra Moradu sites, most often were discovered to have well-preserved organic material (clothing and pearls) that demonstrates that relics were treated as living beings and worshiped in a manner similar to the practice in Sri Lanka.

Architectural Traits and Greco-Buddhist Synthesis

Gandharan stupa architecture contains certain characteristics that reflect the regional cultural synthesis. While retaining the basic functional form of a reliquary with a spire on top, Gandharan stupas also included Hellenistic structural and decorative features. Stone buildings had more longevity and allowed for more elaborate carved decoration than brick construction, as was the case in Anuradhapura (Behrendt).

The most notable aspect of Gandharan stupas is their elaborate sculptural programs. In the Metropolitan Museum, for example, narrative reliefs showing images of scenes from the miraculous life of the Buddha Shakyamuni, while underscoring his physical presence at the site (Vidya Dehejia) presented important ideas in Buddhist narrative to the cosmopolitan Gandharan audience, while also serving a devotional purpose.

The Metropolitan Museum notes that as Gandhara developed sculptural programs shifted. First, the narrative tradition quickly gave way to independent images that were better suited to modes of devotion, the earliest of which is a small bronze Buddha that can be dated to the first or second century A.D. Later, by the third through fifth centuries, the sacred areas of the pilgrimage sites were populated with images of buddhas and bodhisattvas made of schist (Vidya Dehejia).

Reliquary Art and Craftsmanship

Gandharan reliquaries showcase the pinnacle of Indo-Greek craftsmanship from antiquity. Archaeological excavations have uncovered relic containers carved out of stone, crystal, metal, and terra cotta, many of which contained bone fragments or ash assumed to contain the relics of the Buddha. Stone reliquaries regularly come with carved iconographic programs that depict images of the Buddha, donors, written inscriptions, and ornate decorative patterns (Marshall 301). According to the Metropolitan Museum, the use of stucco replaces schist as the medium for sculpture between the third and the mid-fifth century presumably in response to demands to beautify these rapidly developing local centres of Buddhism.

The technical excellence and elaborate symbolism of Gandharan reliquaries reflect the region's integration into networks of international trade and cultural

exchange. The Metropolitan Museum notes that “by the middle of the fifth century, Gandhara was conquered by groups of people often identified as the Huns or Hephthalites, thus bringing this major period of Buddhist patronage to a close” (Vidya Dehejia).

Cultural Dimensions of Relic Worship in Gandhara

The relic culture of Gandhara is shaped by a strong epigraphic tradition that has revealed the existence of diverse beliefs between the Sinhalese Buddhists and Gandharans concerning how to interpret relics as a manifestation of the Buddha’s spirit. Based on the inscriptions, it is clear that individuals considered these relics to be alive in some way and had an active role in supporting the individual’s spiritual advancement. Proper veneration of relics also existed and individuals were expected to show respect for them. The presence of diverse sects within Gandhara (Dharmaguptaka and Sarvāstivāda) led to the emergence of a pluralistic relic culture distinct from the Theravāda orthodoxy of Anuradhapura. The cosmopolitan nature of Gandharan society is represented in the numerous backgrounds from which donors originated, resulting in a shared sense of devotion that transcended ethnic boundaries. While royal sponsorship played an important role in relic commemorations in Anuradhapura, there was also a large contingent of merchants who supported the veneration of relics which provided a wider array of individuals with opportunities to participate in this form of devotion. In addition, the pairing of relics with a wealth of Buddhist imagery has enhanced the overall devotional experience of Gandhara and aided in developing greater understanding and appreciation for relics.

Ritual Practices and Sociopolitical Functions

Relics and the practices of veneration that surrounded them have been evidenced in epigraphic and archaeological evidence from Gandhara. In relation to relics, circumambulating stupas is found to have been a major devotional practice. The evidence garnered from inscriptions on reliquaries and votive deposits provides a wealth of evidence for the social aspects of relic centered devotion and makes it possible to identify donors from varying social standpoints including royal family members, monks and nuns, and merchants (Baums 53-70). The Metropolitan Museum states that “relics remained at the center of devotional practice” throughout the development of Gandharan Buddhism, and that pilgrimage sites would “attract donations, often in the form of sculptural imagery”. As previously suggested, the evidence points to a sectarian diversity

shown through epigraphic sources and evidence of various Buddhist schools that existed within Gandhara (Behrendt; Vidya Dehejia).

Comparative Analysis

Archaeological Signatures: Similarities and Differences

Archaeologically, Anuradhapura and Gandhara, although geographically and culturally distinct, shared a relic tradition of considerable similarity, and of considerable difference. In both cases, stupas were used as the primary architectural typology in which relics were preserved and worshipped (Strong 156; Vidya Dehejia). In both cases, stupas contained relic chambers, positioned centrally within the stupa, that generally could be accessed only by monks (Trainor 123; Marshall 267).

Both traditions included votive deposits and donations made in both locations because of the gifts given by devotees at stupas (Marshall 267; Coningham 178). Both Anuradhapura and Gandhara's relic traditions were also defined by monastic associations, and stupas were a functioning part of the integrated monastic complex (Schopen 134; Vidya Dehejia).

Still, there were notable differences between the two. Anuradhapura's stupas also attained monumental scale that is not matched among most Gandharan examples. The Ruvanvelisaya and Jetavanarama were tall stupas, at 338 feet and 400 feet, respectively, and were built with millions of brick units (Sai; Coningham 189). Most stupas in Gandhara were of smaller and modest scale, with votive stupas that were typically a few meters from the ground (Marshall 278).

There was a significant variation in the construction materials and methods used in the two regions. In Anuradhapura, stupas were made using bricks, whereas in Gandhara stone was typically the building material, which reflected the geological and economic realities of each region (Behrendt; Vidya Dehejia). Different styles and materials were used for reliquaries as well, with Gandhara developing more sophisticated portable reliquaries while Anuradhapura focused on reliquaries built into fixed architectural contexts (Marshall 301; Coningham 201).

Architectural and Artistic Expressions

Anuradhapura's tradition of relics gave rise to distinct architectural forms that conveyed Sinhalese cultural identity. The dome shape, the prominent relic chamber, and the decoration presented a sequencing of indigenous Sinhalese aesthetic developments distinct from other forms (Frasch; "Sri Lankan Stupa: A Unique Buddhist Architectural Design of Sri Lanka."). Sinhalese stupa architecture privileged monumental, permanent structures, and the grand scale of stupa architecture communicated a lasting and enduring commitment to the religious practice of Buddhism (Frasch).

The sculptural representations of Anuradhapura's stupas, while not as elaborate as those found at Gandhara, were nonetheless important. Moonstones featuring concentric designs, along with stone carving demonstrated a range of practice in integrating Buddha imagery into stone stairways of stupas, although limited to a modest scale compared to the cornucopia of sculpture at Gandhara (Coningham 123; "Sri Lankan Stupa: A Unique Buddhist Architectural Design of Sri Lanka.").

Gandhara's architectural and artistic traditions had fundamentally different characteristics. The unique Greco-Buddhist synthesis combined Hellenistic representational vocabularies with Buddhist iconographic needs. The Metropolitan Museum notes that "the linear treatment of drapery is stylistically similar to imagery of the Parthian empire", while this "synthesis of foreign styles with Indian forms" is considered "typical of the multi-ethnic character of Gandharan taste" (Vidya Dehejia).

Gandharan stupas included complex sculptural programs. The Metropolitan Museum mentions that sculptors "showed the artist's awareness of Hellenistic motifs and narrative structure" in their depictions of the Buddha, and that these representations show "connections with Greco-Roman art of the Mediterranean" (Vidya Dehejia). Later developments included "monumental images of Buddhas, and, to a lesser extent, bodhisattvas appear" with figures more than 40 feet tall (Vidya Dehejia).

Comparing both traditions illustrate how cultural influences were present in architectural and artistic expressions. Anuradhapura's monumental brick stupas mirrored the local building tradition, materials, aesthetic sensibilities in South Asia, and Theravāda Buddhist theological emphases. Gandhara's polished stone

architecture, sophisticated sculptural programs, and Hellenistic artistic vocabulary were integrated into Mediterranean and Central Asian cultural networks (Strong 189; Vidya Dehejia).

Ritual and Devotional Practices

In both regions' relic-centered devotion took place in largely similar ritual frameworks that were incorporated to the particular locality. The main devotional practice, in both Anuradhapura and Gandhara, involved performing circumambulation (*pradakshina*) around stupas (Strong 145; Vidya Dehejia). Offering practices, similarly, appeared in both regions of Anuradhapura and Gandhara, where devotees offered their flowers, incense, food, coins, and votive objects at stupas (Trainor 134; Marshall 267; Vidya Dehejia).

Ritual pilgrimage traditions developed in both regions, which perhaps is unsurprising as relic sites would prompt devotees to travel significant distances (Oldenberg 234; Vidya Dehejia). However, significant differences distinguished ritual elaboration and ceremonial contexts. Anuradhapura's traditions featured rituals that were organised into state-sponsored, elaborate ceremonies that incorporated participation of thousands of persons (Mahanama et al. 167; Sai), whereas evidence of ritual from Gandhara suggests ceremonies catered to different patterns of ceremony, involving greater participation of individuals and small groups (Marshall 312).

Comparative Cultural Analysis: Theological Frameworks and Religious Identity

While both Anuradhapura and Gandhara viewed relics as representations of the Buddha's spirit, there were significant differences in the ways they expressed their cultures. The Anuradhapura relic tradition, as described in the *Mahāvamsa* and *Dhātuvamsa*, highlighted the idea of continuity in the Theravāda tradition and connected the veneration of relics to Sinhalese ethnicity and kingship, which created one cultural identity and unified under royal authority. Conversely, the Gandhara relic tradition was formed by the different sects and also influenced by a variety of cultures that created a cosmopolitan type of worship and belief. Therefore, the Gandhara relics permitted different interpretations and practices from the various Buddhist communities, and therefore allowed for different ethnic groups to find common ground by recalling who they were as Buddhists. The evidence for this difference in architectural expression is shown in the fact

that Anuradhapura created large, stable (cohesive) stupas that illustrated a cohesive narrative, whereas Gandhara created many different designs and shapes of stupas to reflect the various types of people and places who visited them and the commonality they found in the relics.

Functions in Sociopolitical Context

Relic-centered traditions performed vital political legitimization functions in each area, yet there were notable differences. In Anuradhapura, the Sinhalese rulers envisioned themselves as *Chakravartins*, whose primary responsibility was protecting Buddhism (Mahanama et al. 156; Oldenberg 207). The construction of relic monuments was the most important way to demonstrate this royal responsibility, with kings who built or restored large stupas establishing themselves as just kings deserving of commoners' support.

The close tie between stupa construction and political legitimacy created strong motivation for continual investment into relic monuments over the centuries. The legitimacy tie between the Sinhalese monarchy and the major stupas particularly Thuparama and Ruvanvelisaya effectively made the monuments themselves identities of the Sinhalese Buddhist identity (Coningham 201; "Sacred Island: Anuradhapura." (Sai).

Political legitimacy of relic monuments occurred somewhat differently in Gandhara. While Kushan emperors commissioned monumental stupas establishing themselves as protectors of Buddhism, Gandhara's political plurality meant that multiple rulers patronised Buddhism (Behrendt; Vidya Dehejia). In this regard, there is evidence in the inscriptions across the many evidence sites of an even broader range of patrons; merchant and middle-class donations provided support for a substantial portion of the votive stupas (Marshall 289; Baums).

Research Gaps in the Literature

While there is considerable scholarship on Anuradhapura and Gandhara as distinct areas of inquiry, sizeable gaps exist. Most scholarship deals with one site or time period rather than investigating comparative development systematically across the context of distinct cultural groups (Trainor 8; Schopen 12). There is minimal scholarship that incorporates archaeological, textual, or cultural evidence into comprehensive comparative studies. Because of the exclusive, lack

of integration, insight into the way that Buddhist ideologies were transmitted, adapted, and materialised among different cultures has been neglected. This research will fill that scholarly gap by undertaking integrated comparative analysis that reveals how commonly-held Buddhist principles were localised differently in Anuradhapura and Gandhara, while developing methodologically innovative approaches to adaptation and transmission.

Discussion

Factors Influencing Different Traditions

A number of interrelated factors influenced the different traditions. The geographical and environmental context set the conditions for local traditions to take root. In Sri Lanka, the abundance of water as well as clay deposits created reasonable economic conditions for brick as a building material, while in Gandhara the mountainous geography created advantageous geographic conditions for accessing stone as a building material (Behrendt; Vidya Dehejia). The material conditions created by the environmental context set the table for architectural designs and artistic elaboration (Frasch; Sri Lankan Stupa Buddhist Architecture).

Climate and ecology influenced the subsistence systems on which Buddhist communities in both locations were reliant. The irrigation of rice in Sri Lanka created agricultural surpluses to mobilise economic resources to monumental construction projects, while climate and geography in Gandhara created pastoral and trade economies (Marshall; Vidya Dehejia). These economic situations would also influence the scale and distribution of the relic monuments (Coningham 189). Religious expression was heavily influenced by cultural matrices and the preexisting artistic traditions. Sri Lanka's trading connections in the Indian Ocean meant that Sinhalese artistic traditions developed under South Asian traditions. Likewise, Gandhara's geographic setting meant that it was interconnected with Mediterranean, Central Asian, and South Asian cultural networks all at once, facilitating an unprecedented cultural synthesis (Strong; Vidya Dehejia).

Political structures and the patterns of patronage influenced institutional development. Anuradhapura developed as the combined capital of a centralised Sinhalese state and thus royal power resided entirely with the monarch and permitted the mobilisation of resources to build massive monuments like “the

Great Stupa” (Mahanama et al. 156; Oldenberg 207). The political fragmentation of power arrangements in Gandhara meant that power remained decentralised and able to be shared amongst multiple rulers and wealthy merchants creating a different type of patronage (Marshall 278; Vidya Dehejia).

Religious affiliations and doctrinal intramural emphases influenced the interpretation of relics. The commitment to Theravāda Buddhism in Anuradhapura suggested that the veneration of relics evolved within a framework which immediately emphasised its distinctive attainment of the historical Buddha and the preservation of the purported teachings of Buddhism through written text (Strong 167). By contrast, and with the sectarian diversity of Gandhara, Mahāyāna Buddhists coexisted with Theravāda Buddhists, and the elaborate theological cosmologies of Mahāyāna encouraged the introduction of complexities of iconographic programs (Behrendt; Vidya Dehejia).

Trade and cultural exchange influenced the artistic tradition even more profoundly. The geographical location of Gandhara on trade routes, that went through the Mediterranean, Central Asian, and South Asian worlds, allowed Gandharan artists to be exposed to the sights, sounds, and feel of their innovative surroundings within the different artistic traditions they experienced (Errington and Cribb 134; Vidya Dehejia). Anuradhapura remained more isolated from outside artistic traditions, allowing its development of distinctively local forms (Frasch).

Universal Buddhist Elements and Local Adaptations

Although there were clear distinctions, key theological ideas about relics were notably stable at Anuradhapura and Gandhara. In both traditions, relics were seen as physical embodiments of the Buddha’s ongoing presence in the world after his parinirvana (Strong; Vidya Dehejia). In both traditions it was understood that relics transmitted power for spiritual advancement, and the acquisition of merit and blessings by the devotee (Trainor 134; Vidya Dehejia).

Similar ritual structures emerged across the traditions. Walking around stupas was the typical devotional observance; it was an expression of the dedicated layperson’s respect for the Buddha and merit production. Possessions of flowers, incense, food, and votive objects were expressions of piety, and became aspects of ritual transactions (Strong 156; Marshall 267).

However, these common elements were vigorously translated at the local level. Anuradhapura's relic tradition emphasised the permanence of monuments, represented through monumental brick stupas charging cases for the permanence of the Buddha's relics (Frasch; Coningham 201). The Gandharan relic tradition focused on visual communication and theological expansion by including lavish coalitions of sculptural programs that educated religious audiences (Behrendt; Vidya Dehejia).

Material representations of doctrine are adapted for local contexts. Anuradhapura represented Buddhist concepts through brick architecture and careful proportioning (Frasch; Coningham 201; Sri Lankan Stupa Buddhist Architectural Design). Gandhara represented doctrine through elaborate figural sculpture and narrative reliefs that communicated Buddhist teachings through visual exemplars (Strong 189; Vidya Dehejia). Both traditions employed glocalisation processes, in which universal practices were adapted to local contexts, creating hybrid forms that were both recognisably Buddhist and distinctly local (Strong 201; Appadurai 34).

Material Religion and Relic Agency

Current scholarship utilising material religion theorising stresses that relics operated as active agents in Buddhist religious life and not as mere passive receptacles of devotional engagement (Morgan 45; Trainor 145). Relics acted as material intermediaries by which the sacred was made real and present. The Buddha's death posed a religious crisis: following the Buddha's parinirvana, how would the faithful epistemologically access his presence, and benefit from the merits of his awakening? Relics offered a material way out of that religious crisis (Morgan 45; Trainor 145).

The sensory dimensions of relic veneration are vital to the way efficacy is perceived. Devotees circumambulating stupas engaged all of their senses, they saw the impressive form and the sculptural program of the monuments, they smelled the incense, they heard the chanting and the bells, they touched the sacred space and objects of veneration, and they tasted the offerings (Morgan 67; Trainor 156). The engagements with all the senses produced potent religious experiences within which devotees materially encountered the sacred.

Embodied dimensions of relic veneration involved the body of the devotee engaging with sacred space. The act of circumambulation involved repetitive

walking, which engaged the body in a rhythmic way of engaging with the monumental structure. The repetitive engagement of the body through the act of circumambulation pacifically the bodily rhythm of walking, visual tracking of the monument's form, and mental focus on the intention produced altered states of consciousness that allowed for the ability to have a mystical experience (Strong 212; Trainor 167).

The building of sacred landscapes created religiously defined spaces in the surrounding lands through the planting of relic monuments. Important relic centers, especially Anuradhapura and places of pilgrimage across the expanse of Gandhara, became the centers of meaning that ordered the surrounding regional territories prayerfully and politically (Turner; Appadurai 45). The practice of pilgrimage at these centers gave rise to a movement of networks of movement and communication, around devotional activity, that connected communities apart from each other in both geography but in devotion to a shared sacred body of relics.

Relics created layers of political and symbolic capital that could be rendered valuable in a variety of different contexts. Rulers who provided patronage to the relic monuments, converted their material resources into religious authority and, ultimately, political legitimacy (Tambiah; Strong). Rulers became associated with the relic's connection to the ultimate attainment of the Buddha and the symbolic capital of that association was transferred onto patrons, so that the spiritual authority could reinforce their political and sacred authority as ruling kings (Tambiah; Oldenberg 207).

Conclusion

The comparative study of relic traditions in Anuradhapura and Gandhara offers basic points of similarity and notable differences in the development of relic veneration practices in these two regions. Both traditions identified the stupa as the main form of architecture for the preservation and veneration of relics; both traditions included ritual practices in which circumambulation of and offering to relics were important; and both traditions at least presupposed some sort of understanding of relics as material vessels of the Buddha's royal presence after his parinirvana. These common aspects of the two experiences of relic traditions were derived from shared Buddhist theological roots and ritual practices distributed over space and time as Buddhism expanded (Strong 12; Trainor 56).

Although architectural analysis is necessary to study relics and their significance in society, cultural elements and religious identity are equally important aspects of the design and decoration of religious structures. By effectively utilising both textual sources (the *Mahāvamsa*'s and *Dhātuvamsa*'s accounts of Anuradhapura-Gandhara) and archaeological findings, we can better understand how different relics represent not only sacred objects that people worshipped but also play an important role in constructing the early Buddhist community, establishing the legitimacy of political leaders, and forming the geographic boundaries of the sacred world.

However, the two traditions were distinguished by significant variances. Anuradhapura was a site of monumental brick stupas unimagined elsewhere, symbolising stability and royal sponsorship from the centre (Coningham 201; Sai). The relic tradition became closely tied to Sinhalese ethnic identity and the legitimacy of Sinhalese rulers (Mahanama et al. 156; Buddhist Channel). The unbroken tradition from the ancient to present was a tool for Sinhalese Buddhists to argue that their practices and beliefs today were meaningfully connected to what they claim was an ancient tradition.

Gandhara developed a wider array of relic traditions that exemplified several aspects of sectarian diversity and a cosmopolitan cultural setting (Behrendt; Vidya Dehejia). In building materials, the use of stone and architectural practices, allowed for more elaborate sculptural and architectural programs that integrated Greco-Buddhist artistic styles (Vidya Dehejia). Increased evidence of merchant-related gifts of votives suggested that relic focused veneration developed a wider base of participant involvement in Gandhara than at Anuradhapura which would have invested heavily into monumental forms of representation (Marshall 289; Baums). The sectarian diversity of Gandhara meant that different communities of practitioners produced distinct theological systems of understanding relics and their accompanying practices often producing heterogeneous interpretations and ritual practices (Behrendt; Vidya Dehejia).

The collection of sacred remains originally coming from Gandhara preserved in Museums in Pakistan (such as Lahore Museum, Peshawar Museum, Taxila Museum, Karachi Museum) serves as substantial archaeological evidence of relic culture. The pure archaeological remains themselves - stone caskets to gold relic containers with Greco-Buddhist iconography - provide a clear reminder that the process of honouring sacred remains was extremely complex

and extremely different than many other forms of relic honouring, including Anuradhapura where only members of ruling families dedicated relic. The lists of people who have donated to these relics reveal the extent to which relic culture spread throughout different ethnic groups (and classes) in Gandhara compared with Anuradhapura, where most people were still from royal bloodlines.

Cultural factors contributed to the differences in the development of relic traditions. Geographical settings determined what materials were available and the subsistence systems providing support for Buddhist communities. Political agencies helped determine the extent of resources that could be concentrated for a monumental building or whether resources for votives would be diffused between patrons (Mahanama *et al.*, 156; Marshall 278). Sectarian affiliations also helped determine theological definitions of what constituted relics and appropriate expressions of devotion/ reverence. Within cultural practices, trade networks not only exposed Gandhara to multiple artistic traditions, but culture also developed a degree of circumscribed isolation at Anuradhapura. These multiple factors produced distinctive relic traditions defined geographically in at least in relation to character and form to each site.

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Buddhist Domestication in Pre-Islamic Maldives: Evidence from the ‘Dan’bidū Lōmāfanu’ and ‘Kuḍahuvadū Lōmāfanu’

Hassan Amir

Abstract

Archeological remains and historical sources indicate that Maldivians predominantly practiced Buddhism prior to conversion to Islam. Following conversion, the newly Islamic kings undertook nation-wide programs of mass conversion, construction of mosques and reapportionment of property that had previously belonged to the temples and monasteries. As a result, there is very little information available about the pre-Islamic Buddhist religious landscape that prevailed in the Maldives. The actions of various kings engaged in program of mass conversion are recorded on copper-plate manuscripts called ‘Lōmāfanu.’ This study analyzes two of these historical epigraphical sources, the ‘Dan’bidū Lōmāfanu’ and the ‘Kuḍahuvadū Lōmāfanu.’ This study makes use of five complementary areas of interaction: residential, social, ritual, economic and political to re-create the Buddhist institutions, structures and relationships that most probably existed in Maldives prior to Islam. This study suggests that, based on the deep and intertwined nature of interactions re-created from the ‘Lōmāfanu’ Buddhism in Maldives most likely was in an advanced stage of integration, and was most likely ‘domesticated.’ Further, this study suggests that the unique geography of Maldives, difficulty in ocean-travel during periods of monsoon, and the necessity to control the harvest and trade of cowrie shells, which had both monetary and ritual value compelled the Buddhist order to establish permanent residential settlements. As the size of these settlements grew, the Buddhist institutions gained greater political and social leverage, amassed greater economic fortune, over time, became ‘domesticated.’

Keywords: Pre-Islamic, Buddhism, Domestication, Maldives, Social context

Introduction

‘*Shrouded in mystery*’ is a term one comes across quite often when researching Maldivian history. While questions like ‘where did the people of Maldives originate from,’ and ‘how were the Maldives Islands inhabited’ are indeed questions of deep history, relatively recent events have very few historically useful materials to provide answers. Even as late as 1934, British explorer T. W. Hockley, who undertook an exploratory visit to the islands, referred to Maldives as ‘*terra incognita*.’ (Hockly 14). Hockly was echoing themes of unfamiliarity and mystery expressed by earlier historians and explorers such as C. W. Rosset, who visited Maldives in 1887, and L. I. A. Young and W. Christopher, from the British Admiralty Survey of the Maldives conducted in 1834–1835 (Rosset 1; Young & Christopher).

Despite being the seminal moment in Maldivian history, the religious landscape of Maldives prior to conversion to Islam in 1153 CE, the events surrounding the conversion and its aftermath are ‘*shrouded in mystery*.’ Based on the scant archeological and historical evidence that has been painstakingly compiled by Maldivian and foreign scholars and academics, it is evident that, prior to conversion to Islam in the 12th century CE, Maldives followed Buddhism (Maniku, “Conversion” 73; Mohamed, “Early History” 8; Mikkelsen, “Archeology” 24-25).

Following the conversion of King Sri Sandaneyka Bhuvna Adhitiya (who adopted the Muslim name of ‘Sultan Muhammad Ibn Abdullah’), delegations of soldiers and religious teachers were dispatched to various parts of the Maldives to convert the population (Mohamed, “King and Queens” 13). The conversion to Islam was a gradual and slow process that, in some instances, involved violence as well as seizure of property and dismantling the Buddhist temples (Maniku, “Conversion” 74; Thajuddheen, “Islamic History” 17-18).

Apart from archeological remains of ancient temple structures, epigraphical sources such as copper plates called *Lōmāfanu* also attest to Maldives’ Buddhist past. There are only four such artefacts that are presently available. Of these four, this paper utilises the *Dan’bidū Lōmāfanu* and the *Kuḍahuvadū Lōmāfanu* to analyse the pre-Islamic Buddhist institutions and landscape of Maldives.

This paper proposes that the pre-Islamic Buddhist tradition that existed in the Maldives was ‘domesticated’ and was highly evolved, with deep connections

to the royalty, society, and the Maldivian state. To establish the above, this paper analyses these historical documents based on a theoretical and conceptual framework of why and how Buddhism becomes domesticated and develop these deep linkages.

This paper starts by discussing the theoretical and conceptual framework of Buddhist domestication that underpins this study, as well as the methodology employed. To help the reader contextualise the 10th and 11th century Maldives and Maldivian society, this paper will present a brief introduction to Maldives, the ancestry of the Maldivian islanders, and its pre-Islamic religious landscape, particularly focused on Buddhist archeological material presently available.

Next, this paper will discuss both the *Dan'bidū Lōmāfanu* and the *Kuḍahuvadū Lōmāfanu* as primary historical sources. This will be followed by a thematic analysis of these historical documents, followed by a discussion based on the theoretical and conceptual framework, as outlined below. The paper will conclude by discussing the limitations and a brief note about areas of future research.

Maldivian Geography, Ancestry, and Pre-Islamic Religious Landscape

The Maldives archipelago lies at the southern tip of India, in the Western region of the Indian Ocean. The small, low-lying islands are divided into 19 natural atolls, separated by sea channels of varying width. The islands rise only a mere 1 metre above sea level and do not support dense vegetation or intense agriculture. They are covered by thick tropical scrub and coconut palms and interspersed with larger trees such as jackfruit and breadfruit (Bell, "Maldives Islands: Physical Features" 2-3).

Since the earliest times, Maldives have served as a waypoint along the Indian Ocean maritime trade route. Ships sailing from the Middle Eastern ports made landfall in Maldives to take on fresh water and provisions such as dried bonito, coconuts, and other agricultural products (Hogendorn & Johnson; de Silva 174). Maldives also had more lucrative exports, such as turtle shells and the highly prized ambergris (Mohamed, "Pre-Islamic Maldives" 4-6; Jaufar 44-50). Another commodity in high demand was the cowrie shell, more specifically the *Cypraea annulus* and the *Cypraea moneta*. These shells were used as a form of currency in many parts of the world and may also have been used in religious rituals (Hogendorn & Johnson; Mohamed, "Essays on Early Maldives"; Yang 9-12;

Litster 6-8; Ray). Capitalising on the trade of cowrie shells may have been the rationale for the establishment of the Buddhist civilisation in the Maldives (Mikkelsen, “Excavations at Kaashidhoo” 9-10).

According to Maldivian folklore, the first settlers of Maldives, called *Dheyvis*, came from Kalibanga in India¹ prior to the establishment of Asoka’s Kingdom. Historians agree that Maldives was likely inhabited by successive waves of fishermen, wrecked sailors, and settlers, and in some cases, exiles from coastal communities of the Indian sub-continent and Sri Lanka. (Maloney viii; Heyerdahl 60-76; Mohamed, “Pre-Islamic Maldives” 2). The first kingdom of Maldives was established by the *Dheyvis*. The kings of Maldives trace their ancestry to the Solar (*Adeetta*) and Lunar (*Soma*) dynasty. This is reflected in the elaborate panegyric and regnal names adopted at the time of the coronation of Maldivian monarchs. The Maldivian *Dhivehi* language originated from Prakrit and Sanskrit, and has very close association with Sri Lankan languages, chiefly Sinhalese (Vitharana; Geiger, 3; Maumoon 23-25), Modern *Dhivehi* shows significant Arabic, Urdu and English influences (Maniku 1-3; Maumoon 23-25).

The diverse groups of settlers who populated Maldives would have brought with them various faith traditions, including Vedic traditions, early *Brahmanism*, and the worship of more localised deities, ancestors, and natural phenomenon (Mohamed, “Notes on Early History of Maldives” 7-9). Buddhism is believed to have come to the Maldives Islands at around the same time as it did in Sri Lanka, spurred by Asoka’s proselytizing campaigns, and Maldivians adhered to the Theravada School (Mohamed, “Notes on Early History of Maldives” 7-9). Due to the syncretic nature of faith traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism and the geographical dispersion of the Maldivian islands, it is highly likely that multiple religions co-existed. This is supported by the plethora of folktales and myths which allude to various malevolent spirits that are most likely to have been former deities.

Buddhism in Maldives and Conversion to Islam

Statues, Buddhist religious icons, temple ruins, and other associated structures such as wells, bathing tanks and ritual areas have been discovered in several

¹These accounts are recorded in Allama Shihabuddine’s ‘Kitab fi Athaari Meedoo al-Qadimiyyeh, (1650-1687) ‘On the Ancient Ruins of Meedoo’. While the text, in its entirety, is not available, this information is obtained from an extract available on ‘Maldives Royal Family’ website, https://maldivesroyalfamily.com/maldives_antiquity.shtml.

locations across Maldives. Maldivian historian A. H. Maniku (qtd. in Mikkelsen “Buddhist Archeology” 301) stated that there were approximately fifty-nine sites believed to be former Buddhist structures. These ruins are commonly referred to as *Havittha* (*Chaitiya*), *Ustu’nbu* (Stupa) and *Ver /Veyru* (*Vihara*) (Bell “Maldives Islands: Physical Features” 75).

While many of the ruins are buried under mounds of earth and vegetation, some have been excavated over the years. Based on these, scholars have pieced together the general layout and design of the Buddhist temples that probably existed in Maldives. The temple complex included a stupa (dome), bathing pond, dormitories for the resident monks, open spaces surrounded by *Bo* trees, as well as an image house within the temple to house the various statues and icons (*Vitharana*).

This period between the 9th and 11th centuries CE saw seismic changes within the larger Indian Ocean region, as Islam made its entry into the Indian subcontinent. The Indian Ocean trade, which had always been dominated by foreigners, passed into the hands of Muslim merchants who had established significant communities in important port cities. As Islam flourished along the Indian Ocean littoral, Muslim merchants and traders won the favour of local rulers and powerbrokers. Islam’s ascendancy in the region also coincided with the rise of a more rigid *Puranic* Hindu ideology, leading to the ossification of the caste system in India, and doctrinal complications concerning sea travel for Hindus. This period also saw a general decline of Buddhism within the region because of Chola invasions, as well as increased monasticism.

Maldivian history states that, as part of Rajaraja I’s imperial expansion, the Cholas invaded and captured the two northernmost atolls of Maldives (Maniku, “Conversion of Maldives” 80). The Chola invaders in earning him the title *Ruler of Fourteen Atolls and Two Thousand Islands of Maliku – Addu* (Mohamed “King and Queens” 10). Maldivian recorded history mentions five monarchs who ruled Maldives prior to conversion. These include Queen Dhamaharu, the last ruler of the Solar dynasty in Maldives, who married Sri Baladitiya (of the Lunar Dynasty) from Kalinga. It is highly likely that these monarchs practiced Buddhism. Sri Mahabharana Mahaaradun, the king who ousted the Cholas, was the last Buddhist king of Maldives.

When King Sri Mahabharana Mahaaradun passed away, the throne went to the son of his uterine sister, King Sri Sandaneyka Bhuvna Adhitiya (*Tribhuvana*

Adhitiya). It was during King Tribhuvana Adhitiya's reign that Maldives officially converted to Islam (Maniku "Conversion of Maldives" 75). Islam may already have been present in Maldives prior to the official conversion of the king, brought due to the contact and interactions with foreign travelers, merchants, and preachers (Suood 8-9).

Though there is consensus that Maldives officially converted to Islam in 1153 CE, historians differ significantly about the personage responsible for the conversion and the events surrounding it. The famed explorer *Ibn-Battuta*, who spent 18 months in Maldives and served briefly as the Chief Justice (*Qadi*) names the preacher as *Abul Barakat Yoosuf al Barbary* (from the Maghrebi/ Barbary Coast) of Morocco. *Ibn-Battuta's* rendition of the conversion included a monster, in the form of a lighted ship, emerging from the sea, and the sacrifice of a virgin girl. The preacher in question overcame the monstrous apparition by reciting the Quran, after which the king accepted Islam. (Husain 204-205). Maniku ("Conversion of Maldives" 78-80) agrees that the name of the preacher is *Abul Barakat Yoosuf al-Barbary* but contends that the preacher hailed from the *Barbaryn* coast of Sri Lanka, near present day Beruwala district.

Maldivian historian, chronicler, and Chief Justice Hassan Thajuddheen wrote that Maldives accepted Islam at the hands of *Sheikh Shamsuddheen Yoosuf al-Tabrezi*. According to the *Tarikh* chronicles, the preacher subdued yet another monster, after which the grateful king and populace accepted the call to Islam. (Thajuddheen 17-19). Some Mughal-era sources attribute Maldives' conversion to Sufi saint and preacher *Jalaluddheen Tabrezi*, a follower of *Sheikh Suhrawardi* and whose shrine stands in a port city called *Dheva Mahal*. (Bell, "Maldives Islands: Physical Features" 71). Luthufee (3-4) suggests that the preacher was *Abul Rikab Yoosuf al-Tabrezi* (hailing from *Tabrez*).

Despite these scholarly disagreements, what is evident is that after King Tribhuvana converted to Islam, he issued a general proclamation enjoining all Maldivians to convert as well. He dispatched soldiers and Islamic scholars, under royal warrants, to all corners of Maldives. As part of this campaign, temples were demolished, former royal grants rescinded, and the properties of the temple and the Sangha confiscated. New mosques were erected, and all Maldivians were instructed to fulfill the obligations of the new religion (Thajuddheen 17-19).

Notes on the *Dan'bidū Lōmāfanu* and *Kuḍahuvadū Lōmāfanu*

The two *Lōmāfanu* discussed in this paper provide critical insights into how the kings conducted the Islamic conversion campaign. As a primary historical source, the two *Lōmāfanu* are amongst the oldest written Maldivian records. *Lōmāfanu* literally means *great metal leaf*, which is apt, because these are royal decrees inscribed on metal plates or sheets (Disanayake & Wijayawardhana 63).

The *Dan'bidū Lōmāfanu* was issued in 1196 CE, roughly 43 years after the conversion to Islam. Bell (1940) had classified this *Lōmāfanu* as *Ethere Kolu Lōmāfanu* (Palace *Lōmāfanu*), but since then, as the *Lōmāfanu* discusses events on the island of Dan'bidū, it has been renamed as *Dan'bidū Lōmāfanu* (Disanayake & Wijayawardhana 63-64; 1986; Najeeb 4). Based on the numbering on the sheets, it is determined that this *Lōmāfanu* contained a total of 16 plates, with one plate missing (Najeeb 6). The plates are held together with a metal ring passed through a hole, and all the plates, save for the first, have inscriptions on both faces. The inscriptions are in an early form of Maldivian script called *Eveyla Akuru*, and bear a close resemblance, both in style and script, to medieval Sinhalese scripts from the time of King Vijayabahu I (Disanayake & Wijayawardhana 65).

The *Dan'bidū Lōmāfanu* had been translated by two different parties. The first translation was carried out under the direction of the Maldives National Centre for Linguistics and Historical Research in 1982. The team comprised Professors J. B. Disanayeka and G. W. Wijayawardhana from Sri Lanka, and Hassan Ahmed Maniku from Maldives. This translation was done in English. The second translation, into modern Dhivehi language, was carried out by Ali Najeeb, who assisted the team that worked on the first translation. The Dhivehi translation was published by the National Centre for Linguistics and Historical Research in 2001, as part of the Maldivian Heritage (*Dhivehinge Tharika*) (Najeeb 5). This paper makes use of both these translations.

The *Kuḍahuvadū Lōmāfanu* was issued between 1237 and 1238 CE, during the reign of Sultan Sri Valla Dhiyo, also known as Sri Radha Suvara Maharadhun (1232-1257 CE). The *Kuḍahuvadū Lōmāfanu* refers to the king as 'Rāarādesvara (Sanskrit Rāyarājeśvara),' and in some other historical records, he is referred to as 'Elder Sri Rāarādesvara' (Mohamed, "Kings and Queens" 25; Maldives Language Academy 7). The *Kuḍahuvadū Lōmāfanu* is dated roughly eighty years

from the date of conversion, and thirty-six or thirty-seven years from the *Dan'bidū Lōmāfanu*.

The *Kuḍahuvadū Lōmāfanu* was classified by Bell as the *Haddhummathi Lōmāfanu*. Since it contains records of events that transpired on the island of Kuḍahuvadū, the document has since been re-classified as *Kuḍahuvadū Lōmāfanu*. This *Lōmāfanu* also has some plates missing, and in its present form, it has eight surviving plates. As in the *Dan'bidū Lōmāfanu*, the plates are inscribed on both sides. The *Kuḍahuvadū Lōmāfanu* was inscribed at a time when the *Eveyļa Akuru* was undergoing transformations, and the script differs slightly from the older *Dan'bidū Lōmāfanu* (Najeeb 6-7).

At the request of the National Centre for Linguistics and Historical Research, the *Kuḍahuvadū Lōmāfanu* was translated into English by Jost Gippert and subsequently into modern-day *Dhivehi* by Mariyam Easha Azeez (Maldives Language Academy 2).

At a stylistic level, the language and form of both the *Dan'bidū Lōmāfanu* and *Kuḍahuvadū Lōmāfanu* closely mirror similar grants and endowment decrees issued in parts of contemporary South India and Sri Lanka. The decrees start with an elaborate eulogy, tracing the lineage of the monarch. It mentions the king's virtues of masculine virility, heroic fearlessness, sage wisdom, and justice. Details of the decrees are listed in the middle sections. As the decrees ends, sanctions and punishments for the violation of the decree are mentioned. The decrees conclude with the details of the inscriber and the particulars of the royals, nobles, and commissioned officials who bore witness.

The historical documents this paper utilises were issued by the respective kings during their campaigns of Islamic conversion. Hence, information pertaining to the Buddhist institutions, rituals, and interactions are based on inferences by 'reading between the lines.' Where appropriate, this paper also proposes logical explanations based on the Maldivian social, geographical, cultural, and historical context.

Studies such as these face severe limitation; the chief limitation being a dearth of published literature on Maldivian history, in general, and Maldives' pre-Islamic history in particular. There is a certain taboo about researching and writing about this area, but this paper aims to fill some of this gap and dispel some of the 'mystery' that shrouds this ancient era of Maldivian history. Another

limitation is that the primary historical sources analysed in this study are not intact. To overcome this, the paper makes logical inferences by comparing the two historical documents and by situating them within the context and time of the events.

Thematic Analysis of the Dan'bidū Lōmāfanu & Kuḍahuvadū Lōmāfanu

Historical records indicate that at the time of Islamic conversion, the island of Dan'bidū, in Haddhummathi Atoll (administratively known as L/Laamu Atoll) was a centre for Buddhism in the region, along with the islands of Isdhoo, Gan, and Mundoo in the same atoll² (Najeeb 7).

The *Dan'bidū Lōmāfanu* recounts how Sultan Dhinei Kalaminja, Sri Gadanaditya Maharadhun (1192-1198 CE) destroyed the Buddhist temple and associated structures on the island, forced the monks as well as the public to convert to Islam, and stripped the Sangha and Buddhist laity of their lands, properties, and formerly established royal grants. After having done this, he issued new decrees bestowing land and incomes on those who converted. King Gadanaditya also built a mosque on the island and decreed grants for its upkeep and maintenance. He then proceeded to redistribute the land and apportioned revenue between the royal coffers, the mosque and the public. In the same decree, the king reorganised the noble households of the island (Mohamed, "Kings and Queens" 24-25) and assigned persons to the mosque (Maniku, "Loamaafaanu" 76).

The *Kuḍahuvadū Lōmāfanu*, issued by King Sri Rāarādesvara, reveals how the King undertook the conversion campaign in Kuḍahuvadū, in the Nilandhu Atoll (administratively Dh. / Dhaalu atoll). The island of Kuḍahuvadū had a strong Buddhist presence, and they resisted conversion until this decisive intervention by the King. The events recounted in the *Kuḍahuvadū Lōmāfanu* took place eighty-eight years after Maldives accepted Islam. This indicates that, following the conversion to Islam, various Maldivian kings undertook a long-drawn out campaign to dismantle Buddhist institutions and ideology from Maldives. While the geographically dispersed nature of the islands and difficulties in sea travel account for the delayed conversion of some islands and regions (Mohamed, "King and Queens 13-23), it also reveals the entrenchment of Buddhism in Maldives.

² Extracted from the foreword written for the book by Maldivian historian Naseema Mohamed, Advisor at the National Centre for Linguistics and Historical Research.

After eulogising King Gadanaditya, the *Dan'bidū Lōmāfanu* goes on to say that, in his fourth year, the king, 'having destroyed the shrine erected previously by the infidel kings on *Dabuduv...*' The decree further says the king 'caused the foundation to be laid in the temple land (*veruvathu*) of *Sri Dabuduvu*, on a suitable spot, and erected a Mosque,' and 'bestowed to the Mosque all such things as the alms-hall (*dhanashala*), stupa (*dhegabu*) and the produce of the *vana ara* right of the mosque' (Maniku, "Loamaafaanu" 9-10)

The *Dan'bidū Lōmāfanu* also states that King Gadanaditya 'caused the infidel kings to read the *Shahada*, performed the *Sunnath* rites, established the *Sharia* (Islamic laws) ...' (Maniku, "Loamaafaanu" 9). It can be inferred that, as part of the conversion, the leading monk of the temple was removed, monks of the temple as well as members of laity were made to accept Islam and observe the practices as laid out in the *Sunnah* (Najeeb 7-9).

The *Dan'bidū Lōmāfanu* goes onto state that 'having discontinued the entire dues (*mudalu*) given by the former kings to the *vihara* in *Dubuduvu* (the dues were transferred to the mosque)' Maniku, "Loamaafaanu" 14). It apportions the fields, coconut groves and farms in *Dan'bidū* and surrounding islands to the newly built mosque, by stating that 'from all these portions whatever contributions were due to the *vihara* in *Dubuduvu* in former times are to be taken for worship' (Maniku, "Loamaafaanu" 27-28; Najeeb 49-50). It also states that 'Having examined the government share of King Abarana, given to *vihara* at *Dabuduvu*; three cowrie-shares (*tin vatubolu*) set apart from the *Mavaru* tax from *Dabuduvu...*' (Maniku, "Loamaafaanu" 26), and that 'the *hinna* lands of the impoverished people from the *vihara* in former *Dhabudhivu* should be left to remain as *hinna* and bestowed upon them without hindrance' (Maniku, "Loamaafaanu" 30).

The actions taken by King Gadanaditya in support of the newly erected (Friday) Mosque in *Dan'bidū* can also provide insights into how Maldivian kings viewed their role, as supporters, maintainers and upholders of the faith. After having built the mosque, the king 'erected a flag post' (Maniku, "Loamaafaanu" 10). As mosques usually does not have flag posts, this would most probably be used to fly the king's banner, signifying his support for the newly established religion.

The *Dan'bidū Lōmāfanu* mentions several endowments King Gadanaditya decreed to the new mosque including land, coconut groves, farms. The decree

also mentions certain portions of cowrie shells collected from grant lands, a portion from the king's treasury, and a portion which must be paid by the common folk who work these grant lands. In many cases, these newly decreed islands, reefs and lands were part of former temple endowments (Maniku, "Loamaafaanu"; Najeeb). The decree also bestowed to the mosque certain portions of the valuable ambergris that is harvested in and around the area (Maniku, "Loamaafaanu" 29).

The decree established endowments for the maintenance, upkeep and repair of the newly built mosque. 'The sustenance shares of land (*gadu*) and portions (*pagu*) in *Goviduvu* solely, were ordered to be given to the Mosque for all such things as the supply of thatch, oil for the lamps, rice for the consumption by *Malim*, and the person in charge of the mosque (*mudimu*)' (Maniku, "Loamaafaanu" 29-30). The decree assigned responsibilities to the various occupational groups, such as the *Raaverin* (toddy tappers), who were instructed thus: 'having shown to the people in *Dabuduvu* who climb trees to draw toddy that the thatching of the Mosque should be attended to by them by supplying cadjans' (Maniku, "Loamaafaanu" 33).

It is highly possible that King Gadanaditya bestowed slaves or indentured servants to the newly built mosque. The *Dan'bidū Lōmāfanu* references these people when it says, 'Set forth below are the *alu* (persons) assigned to this *darma* (religion),' and goes onto list several households. (Maniku, "Loamaafaanu" 30-32). The list is concluded by stating 'all these *alu* (persons) are (assigned to the mosque)' (Maniku, "Loamaafaanu" 32). It is entirely within the conventions of the time for religious shrines to be endowed with slaves and indentured servants. Sometimes, villages and farms (which, in the Maldivian case, would be farms, reefs for the harvest of cowries, and coconut groves for the supply of coconut and its products) were decreed, and the inhabitants of these places would become indentured servants or tenants of the temple. It is also probable that the *alu* (persons) assigned to the mosque under this decree were from lower castes. While a caste system is not evident in the present-day Maldivian society, it is highly likely that status and occupation-based stratification may have prevailed in the not-so distant past (Kulikov 200-201).

The *Kuḍahuvadū Lōmāfanu* starts the same way as the *Dan'bidū Lōmāfanu*, with a long eulogy in praise of King Rāārādesvara. The consequential part starts thus 'I will not uphold the monastery formerly built by the infidel kings on Kuḍahuvadū (island) in (Nilandū South / Dhaalu) atoll' (Maldives Language

Academy 79). The King's decree goes on to state the king intended to build a mosque on the former temple lands, and endow the mosque with lands, incomes and gifts (Maldives Language Academy 79-81).

The main objective of the *Kuḍahuvadū Lōmāfanu* appears to be reallocating the islands, lands, incomes and other endowments under the control of the monastery in Kuḍahuvadū, and several other monasteries on islands in the near vicinity. Thus, the decree lists several properties which had formerly been under the control of the Buddhist monasteries: island named Neyo in Miladummaḍulu (Shaviyani) atoll, island named Maḍidū situated in Nelendū (Nilandū North/Faafu) atoll, the uninhabited island named Vetumuli, the uninhabited island named Kuḍapahala situated in Huvadummati (Gaafu Alifu) atoll, the uninhabited island (named) Aturugalu in Ariadū (Ari/Alif Atoll), and the uninhabited island named Vallālohi, the uninhabited island (named) Kraidū, the small uninhabited island (Kuḍapuṭi) situated in northern direction from the same ground, the uninhabited island named Ativolva, the ground located in Māḷos (atoll), the (island of) Dāndū situated in Huvadummati atoll, ground named *Penputi*, ground (used for providing) house-construction beams for the monastery' (Maldives Language Academy). According to the decree, all these lands had been stripped from under Sangha's control and given as endowment to the new mosque.

The *Kuḍahuvadū Lōmāfanu* also includes several references to the division of land and property amongst different neighbouring monasteries and the demarcation of the *sima*. For example, it mentions the demarcation of boundary and division of the island of Puneleste and adjoining reefs between the former monastery on Isdū and an unnamed monastery (Maldives Language Academy 86). There is also mention of demarcation lines between land boundaries of monasteries in Kuḍahuvadū, Ebuludū and Kaḍuludū (Maldives Language Academy 88).

The *Kuḍahuvadū Lōmāfanu* is less intact than the Dan'bidū Lōmāfanu. Thus, it is not evident whether King Rāarādesvara, like King Gadanaditya, endowed the mosque in Kuḍahuvadū with slaves or indentured servants. Nevertheless, there is mention of supply of cadjan thatch for roofing, oil for lamps and other ritual gifts, most likely assigned to different groups as in Dan'bidū. Similarly, there is mention of numerous islands, reefs, lands, incomes and other grants bestowed to the new mosque, either from erstwhile monasteries,

or by reallocating the holding of islands. The decree also mentions significant endowments made directly from the royal treasury.

Both the *Dan'bidū Lōmāfanu* and the *Kuḍahuvadū Lōmāfanu* also included harsh warnings and sanctions for anyone who might seek to desecrate, destroy or otherwise disrupt the grants bestowed on the mosque. The *Dan'bidū Lōmāfanu* states 'It is decreed that any person who misappropriates anything out of the incomes given to the Mosque or any King who violates this order shall be considered a traitor to Almighty God' (Maniku, "Loamaafaanu" 34).

The *Kuḍahuvadū Lōmāfanu* includes a similar, if not, a more direct sanction against the misappropriation of the grant lands and property endowed to the mosque. It states '...not letting anybody, (neither) the consecrated queen, the royal prince, (or any) commissioned dignitary have agricultural work exerted (on it but) assigning it as a share to the lamp oil stock of the mosque; it was granted causing every man who cuts a tree for any purpose from this ground to be indebted to the Makka mosque...', and by 'declaring any mandatee who cuts a tree from the ground (reserved) for the lamp oil, pretending (that) it was (for) a *dhoni*, mast, an oar, or a helm, to be (regarded as being) perfidious against the Prophet...' (Maldives Language Academy 94-96). It goes onto add yet a further admonishment by 'Declaring that a commissioned dignitary who abolishes the decree of the inhabitants of this island will become indebted to the *Makka* mosque by abolishing, damaging, removing this decree (and that) for everybody who warrants for this decree not to be abolished or removed...' and that any man who misappropriates any endowments or gifts to the mosque shall be judged to have been '...perfidious against the king.' (Maldives Language Academy 102).

Though both King Gadanaditya and King Rāārādesvara issued their respective decree to dismantle Buddhist monasteries, disempower the Sangha and establish Islam, the basis of their actions seemingly remained within the old Buddhist framework. This is evidenced by the ritualised gift-giving, as evidenced by the grants and endowments bestowed to the newly erected mosques by both monarchs. The large size of the endowments, including several islands, reefs, lands, incomes and other grants, is also revealing. Large grants and incomes would have been necessary to maintain the Sangha with their multitude of resident monks, but mosques require much fewer resources and manpower for the upkeep and performance of prayers.

The lingering strength of Buddhism, and perhaps an older tradition of Hinduism, is evident when the *Kuḍahuvadū Lōmāfanu* states, as part of the eulogy of King Rāārādesvara, that ‘...having flown up from the *Sumeru-Mandara* mountains...’ (Maldives Language Academy 76). These evidently Hindu and Buddhist religious references reveal that the imagery, language and rhetoric still held strong ties to the pre-Islamic past, almost ninety years after conversion to Islam.

Integration of Buddhism in Islamic Maldives

As had been discussed above, the newly Islamic kings of Maldives, through issuance of their decree of endowment and grants to the mosques, were acting within the frameworks of an entrenched relationship in which the monarch upheld, supported and provided for the religion. In return, the religious faith legitimised the rule of the monarch, and, in Weberian terms, ordered and ‘domesticated the masses.’ (Weber, 1958).

Both *Lōmāfanu* attest to the fact that former Maldivian monarchs had built the temples and monasteries, not only in Dan’bidū and Kuḍahuvadū, but in many other locations. After consecrating the temples, these monarchs had decreed them significant endowments and gifts, including incomes, servants and slaves, and other resources necessary for monastic life. This is evident in the orders issued to dismantle and discontinue these former benefices, as well as the new grants and incomes issued for the newly erected mosques. The kings, in these cases, are asserting their position as the temporal power that upholds, supports and maintains the ecclesiastical power of the religious institutions.

It is interesting to note that even as King Rāārādesvara dismantled and disempowered the monasteries, members of the Buddhist Sangha, represented by the conventuals of Kuḍahuvadū, Nilandū and Māebuludū, had tried to seek an audience with the King (Maldives Language Academy 98). Though historical records are silent on this, King Rāārādesvara might not have been the first Islamic monarch who tried to dismantle the monastery in Kuḍahuvadū. It is also very likely that, in the years that followed official conversion, earlier Maldivian kings had been less committed to spreading the new religion, thus allowing Buddhism and Islam, and perhaps other religions to co-exist in Maldives.

In any case, though the *Kuḍahuvadū Lōmāfanu* states that the king was angered by the presence of the monasteries (Maldives Language Academy 79),

attempts by the Sangha to seek an audience, and perhaps negotiate with the king signal an evolved and highly consequential relationship, which the Sangha had hoped to leverage.

The period of forceful conversion would have been fraught with tension and upheaval. There would have been Buddhist loyalists and sympathisers within the royal and noble families. The *Dan'bidū Lōmāfanu* and the *Kuḍahuvadū Lōmāfanu* included specific references to members of the royalty or nobility who may seek to undo or undermine the decrees issued by the king. Though such cautions are commonly found in temple grants, in the case of grants made to the new mosques, the kings may have felt that their orders might be disobeyed.

Both the *Dan'bidū Lōmāfanu* and the *Kuḍahuvadū Lōmāfanu* are land grant decrees and reveal less about the social connections and ritual practices that would have existed in the Maldives. However, through both these documents, it is possible to infer gifts such as lamp oil, roofing and thatching cadjans, high quality wood for building monasteries, rice, grains, and other commodities would have been regularly made to the Sangha by both the laity and the royalty, through ritualised gift giving. More valuable gifts, such as ambergris and cowrie shells, would have also been given to the temples as part of these rituals.

It is possible to reconstruct social relationships that may have existed between the Sangha and the laity without too much speculation. Even now, most islands of the Maldives carry small populations that are comprised of a small number of families. As in much of South Asia, living within the extended family had been the traditional Maldivian norm. Conventuals of monasteries on the island would most likely have been from the island itself, or from within the atoll. They would have had their kith and kin living in proximity, creating deep and complex webs of support and dependence between the Sangha and the laity. These conventuals would have acted as preachers, healers, and teachers for their lay community.

Unlike the social and ritual aspects, both historical documents reveal much detail about the economic circumstances of the Buddhist Sangha and monasteries. These monasteries had various economic resources under their control, including land plots, reefs for harvesting cowrie shells, farmland, coconut groves, fallow land and entire islands, both inhabited and uninhabited. It is very probable that the inhabitants of the islands and lands under the control of the monasteries were tenants. It can also be suggested that the monasteries had

slaves or indentured servants assigned for their maintenance and upkeep, and as personal staff for senior monks.

The economic resources under the control of the monasteries and the considerable wealth of the Sangha might have been the reason for their survival in Maldives, long after official conversion to Islam. By some accounts, some parts of Maldives converted to Islam as late as 1300 CE, and an economically powerful Sangha might have been able to contend with the Maldivian state and resist, at least for some time.

Ultimately, the economic resources and wealth of the Sangha might have been a chief motivator for Maldivian kings to dismantle the monasteries. The *Kuḍahuvadū Lōmāfanu* makes repeated mention of the ‘deceit’ by which the monastery in Kuḍahuvadū controlled the various islands, lands and incomes. Thus, King Rāārādesvara, having become increasingly frustrated at what he must have seen as a challenge to his authority, undertook the actions that he did. (Maldives Language Academy).

The inevitable question emerges: why and how did these elaborate arrangements develop within Maldivian Buddhism? Maldivian geography undoubtedly would have played a crucial role in the emergence of fixed Buddhist settlements. Though Maldives has an ancient seafaring tradition, sea travel had always presented significant risks, especially during monsoon periods, when gale force winds and rough seas are the norm. Even now, there are several lengthy periods within the year when the Maldivian seas become almost unnavigable. Limited intra-atoll travel may be possible, but inter-atoll travel or longer distances multiply the risks, and people avoided long-distance travel during such periods. Much like *Rain Retreats*, Buddhist monks of Maldives would have been forced to observe *Rough Sea Retreats*.

In addition to rough seas, virulent diseases may also have deterred wandering *bikkhus*. Maldivians living in small islands viewed travelers coming from outside with a certain wariness because they often brought in diseases and pestilence. *Bikkhus* traveling from island to island would also have been viewed thus and probably subjected to inspections and quarantine.

Given the above, there is a high probability that the Buddhist order in Maldives would have restricted themselves to a particular island or group of islands. This is further evidenced by the importance paid, especially in the

Kuḍahuvadū Lōmāfanu, to demarcating and identifying the boundary *sima* of the monasteries. Such elaborate divisions, aimed at preventing overgrazing on the laity and ensuring sustainable support for each monastery, would have emerged only after a sustained period of residence.

Harvesting and trading in cowrie shells may also have necessitated the establishment of fixed Buddhist settlements. Given their economic value as a form of currency and their use in rituals, the cowrie trade would have been a very lucrative industry. It required control of suitable reefs and a steady supply of men and women. Royal grants enabled access to both, but the processing, storing and trading compelled permanent facilities. Wandering *bikkhus* would not be suited for the meticulous record-keeping and inventory management necessary for such an enterprise.

Conclusion

This paper set out to explore, through the help of two primary historical sources; the *Dan'bidū Lōmāfanu* and the *Kuḍahuvadū Lōmāfanu*, whether Buddhism that prevailed in Maldives prior to Islamic conversion was domesticated. A general framework based on five interconnected areas; residential, economic, political, ritual and social relationships between the State and the Sangha and the Laity was proposed to analyse domestication. Additionally, this paper discussed why and how a tradition focused on wandering *bikkhus* seeks and establishes residence.

The pre-Islamic Buddhist tradition that existed in the Maldives, as had been discussed in the paper, had shown a high degree of domestication. The monks lived in permanent settlements, within demarcated borders. They nurtured and maintained a close, symbiotic, and mutually beneficial relationship with the State. The kings upheld and supported the religion, and the Sangha legitimised the kings' rule. The Buddhist Sangha would also have had deep social ties to the surrounding community, confined, as they were, to small islands, populated by a few extended families. The Sangha were supported by ritual gifts, by the royalty, nobility and the laity. These gifts ranged from cadjans for thatching to whale ambergris and entire inhabited islands, along with the people. With these gifts and grants, the monasteries wielded significant economic strength.

Permanent Buddhist residences and deep socio-political and economic interactions emerged in the Maldives due to the islands' unique geography, seasonal weather patterns and the social and cultural context of small island

communities. A small, albeit highly valuable mollusk might have also played a part in why Buddhism became domesticated in the Maldives.

The *Dan'bidū Lōmāfanu* and the *Kuḍahuvadū Lōmāfanu* represented the changing of the old guard in more ways than simply religious. These historical documents also reflected an economic, social and political re-ordering of the state and society. The once powerful and economically dominant Sangha was being systematically dismantled. The ranks of monks were abolished, their lands and incomes taken away, and those who resisted conversion were dealt with in the harshest manner. No longer would ritual gifts of rice, cowrie shells, lamp oil and cadjan be presented to the temple. Instead, they would go to the new mosques and its staff. There would be no more Buddhist teachers, healers and preachers. They would, in time, be replaced by Islamic preachers. The Maldivian kings would no longer favour and bestow largess on temples and monasteries. Instead, they would build mosques and establish *sunnah*. Styling themselves as Sultans, the Maldivian kings would now champion the new faith of Islam. In time, the Buddhist temples and monasteries would be buried under mounds of sand, and the pre-Islamic Buddhist era of Maldives would be '*shrouded in mystery*.'

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Narrative Strategies and Spatial Storytelling: The Seventeenth Century Murals of the Śivakāmasundari Shrine at Chidambaram

Ramakrishnan Panchapakesan and Pallavi Nalawade Jambhale

Abstract

This study undertakes a detailed analysis of the seventeenth century narrative murals at the Śivakāmasundarī shrine in Chidambaram, situating them as a critical lens for understanding the artistic, devotional, and narrative traditions of the period. The inquiry focuses on the narrative strategies employed by the artists and their integration into the shrine's architectural and ritual environment. Particular emphasis is placed on the spatial placement, compositional design, and sequencing of scenes, which together demonstrate how the murals were carefully structured to guide viewers through intricate narratives unfolding across the ceiling. The analytical framework of visual narrative grammar provides a productive lens for interpreting these murals, as it illuminates the visual rules, modes, and devices through which narrative meaning is constructed and communicated. It allows for an examination of how images operate not merely as illustrations of a text, but as autonomous narrative agents that structure temporal progression, spatial orientation, and thematic emphasis. Within this framework, the murals display a dynamic interplay of visual narrative modes, adapting linear, continuous-linear, and monoscenic strategies to meet the varied demands of ritual, mythological, and royal narratives.

Keywords: Visual storytelling, Narratology, Narrative modes, South Indian paintings, Chidambaram murals

Historical Background

The Naṭarāja Temple at Chidambaram is the foremost of the 275 sacred Shaiva sites, dedicated to Śiva as Naṭarāja, the Lord of Dance, a form deeply rooted in Tamil culture. Adopted as the Chola Dynasty's patron deity in the 10th century, Naṭarāja elevated Chidambaram to a central place in Shaiva worship and pilgrimage. The temple's core, likely built during the Chola period, was expanded by the Vijayanagara, Nayaka, and Maratha dynasties, with further restorations by the Chettiar community in the 19th and 20th centuries. Central features include the *Kanaka Sabhā* (Golden Hall), *Chit Sabhā* (Hall of Consciousness), and the original liṅga shrine. To the west of the Śivagaṅgā tank lies the Śivakāmasundari shrine for Pārvatī, with elements from the late Chola and 17th century Nayaka periods.

Chidambaram Māhātmya and Purāṇam

For all eternity, Lord Viṣṇu had reclined upon Śeṣā, the Cosmic Serpent, in the celestial realm of Vaikuṇṭha. One day, Śeṣā noticed a sudden and considerable increase in Viṣṇu's weight and asked for the reason. Viṣṇu explained that he had witnessed a vision of Śiva performing the Cosmic Dance, and that the joy from this vision had caused the heaviness. Curious, Śeṣā requested to hear more, and Viṣṇu began to recount the experience.

In the sacred forest of Dāruvana, a community of rishis, devoted to rituals and austerities, had resided. Although they had attained considerable knowledge and spiritual power, they remained unaware of the role of Divine Grace. To enlighten them, Lord Śiva and Lord Viṣṇu conceived a divine enactment. Śiva entered the forest in the form of Bhikṣāṭana, a radiant and alluring Bhikṣuka. His appearance captivated the Rishis' wives and daughters, who, overcome by fascination and longing, abandoned their routines and followed him in a state of enchantment.

Viṣṇu also assumed an enchanting form as Mohinī, a celestial dancer. The rishis, captivated by her graceful movements, lost their sense of reason and were overtaken by desire. When they eventually became aware of their own susceptibility, their emotions turned to anger. In response to Śiva's illusion, they performed fire rituals intended to destroy him.

From the sacrificial fire, the rishis summoned fearsome beings, first a tiger, which Śiva subdued with ease and wore as a loincloth. Then came serpents, which he draped around himself as ornaments. A dwarf demon followed, whom Śiva pressed beneath his foot as he prepared to perform the Tandava, his Cosmic Dance. His third eye radiated light, flames surged around him, and the mantras cast against him transformed into anklets on his feet. He began to dance with immense power. The earth quaked, Viṣṇu trembled, and even Pārvatī, his consort, observed with a mix of awe and fear. Yet Śiva smiled calmly and raised his foot in a gesture of grace. In that moment, the rishis realised that without Divine Grace, their knowledge held no true substance. Enlightened, they began to dance alongside Śiva and with them, the entire cosmos moved in unison.

Having listened to the tale, Śeṣā felt a deep longing to witness Śiva's dance in person. Viṣṇu granted him permission to leave and pursue his desire. Śeṣā then undertook intense penance for countless ages. Eventually, Śiva appeared before him and offered a boon. Śeṣā asked for only one thing: to witness the Ānandatāṇḍava, the Dance of Bliss. Śiva promised that at a destined moment, he would perform his dance upon the Earth, in the *Sabhā* (Hall) at Tillai, the heart of the world. This sacred site, known as Chidambaram, the Ether of Consciousness, was considered the spiritual centre of the Earth. There, Śeṣā would be born as a human named Patanjali and would meet another sage, Vyāghrapāda (Tiger-footed), who was also destined to witness the Divine Dance.

As foretold, Patanjali was born and journeyed to Tillai, where he encountered Vyāghrapāda, who was engaged in worship of the ancient Mūlasthāna Liṅga. Vyāghrapāda had long faced difficulty in gathering flawless flowers for worship, as insects damaged them by morning. Moved by his devotion, Śiva had granted him the claws and feet of a tiger, enabling him to collect unblemished flowers in the dark hours of night. Together, Patanjali and Vyāghrapāda engaged in intense worship, patiently awaiting the moment of Śiva's dance. In time, 3,000 sages, who later came to be known as the Dikṣitars, also gathered in anticipation.

Eventually, the awaited day arrived. The sounds of drums and conches echoed through the air. Flowers descended from the heavens. A brilliant light, as radiant as a thousand suns and moons, illuminated the *Sabhā*. At its centre, Śiva appeared, performing the *Ānandatāṇḍava*. His divine form emanated both tranquillity and strength. Pārvatī stood beside him as witness. Beings of all

realms, gods, demons, and humans, were overcome with joy and joined in the dance.

Turning to the two sages, Śiva offered them a boon. They requested that his dance remain eternal in that sacred place, so that all who sought him might witness his raised Lotus Foot and attain liberation.

Soon thereafter, a king named Sveta Varman, who suffered from leprosy, arrived at Tillai. Guided by Śiva's will, Patanjali and Vyāghrapāda directed him to bathe in the temple's sacred lotus pond, the Śivagaṅgā. Upon emerging, he was healed, his skin transformed to a golden hue, and he was henceforth known as "Hiraṇya" Varman. Led to the Sabhā, he witnessed the dance of Naṭarāja and, filled with reverence, dedicated his life to the Lord. Consecrated by the 3,000 sages and having received the tiger banner from Vyāghrapāda, the king rebuilt the temple at Chidambaram, establishing it as the eternal abode of Śiva's blissful dance. From that time onward, the temple's festivals commemorated the Divine Dance that set the cosmos in motion, the Dance of Consciousness, the Dance of Liberation (Munivar, 1912).

Visual Narratives and Narrative Strategies in Indian Murals

Visual narratives differ fundamentally from literary storytelling, as they unfold through a sequence of images arranged within deliberate compositional frameworks that simultaneously guide and expand the viewer's interpretive engagement. Unlike texts, where order is fixed, pictorial narratives offer multiple entry points, though the viewer's freedom is carefully directed by visual cues and compositional logic. These narratives function through a triadic structure involving the artist who constructs the story, the protagonist represented within the imagery, and the viewer whose interpretive gaze completes the narrative process. As Brilliant observes, rhetorical strategies, such as framing, directionality, and the representation of natural elements, serve to guide attention and perception, shaping how the story is experienced (Brilliant, 1984).

Seventeenth century South Indian temple murals exemplify this tradition of complex pictorial storytelling. Painted on walls and ceilings, they establish a symbolic relationship between image and observer, in which the act of viewing becomes integral to narrative performance. Scholars such as Dehejia (1990) and Evans (1997) have shown that Indian artists drew upon a diverse repertoire of narrative modes; monoscopic, linear, continuous, synoptic, and panoramic, to

structure visual stories across sites such as Sanchi, Ajanta (Dehejia, 1990), and Hoysala temples (Evans, 1997).

Within this broader framework, the murals of Chidambaram Māhātmya and Chidambaram Purāṇam at Śivakāmāsundarī shrine in Chidambaram, present a strikingly complex example. While linear and continuous sequencing form the structural foundation, the murals also integrate multiple visual strategies seamlessly, enriching both temporal and spatial dimensions of the narrative. This synthesis demonstrates the artists' rhetorical sensitivity, as well as their mastery in balancing narrative clarity with visual complexity. By weaving diverse modes into a coherent flow, the Chidambaram Māhātmya and Chidambaram Purāṇam murals transform painted space into a dynamic field of narrative performance, embodying the interplay of rhetoric, perception, and visual form.

Artistic Style

The corpus of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century murals from the Tamil region represents a distinct phase in South Indian mural traditions, with particularly dense concentrations in and around Madurai in the lower middle and western parts of Tamil Nadu. These paintings are characterised by a stylistic vocabulary that departs in significant ways from the Andhra tradition. Figures are typically robust and compact, with rounded fleshy limbs, yet without the emphatic circular articulation of knees and elbows that marks Andhra figural conventions. Outlines are executed in black strokes of uniform width, providing clarity and coherence to the pictorial field. Facial features, especially the eyes, are rendered in elongated forms that maintain compositional elegance but rarely protrude when shown in profile, thereby avoiding the dramatic exaggeration found in earlier idioms.

The pictorial ground in these Tamil murals is generally rendered in bold yet restrained tonalities of red, white, or green, with decorative motifs such as floral sprays, textile hangings, or architectural elements. Alongside expansive narrative cycles, series of iconic or devotional images frequently appear, underscoring the dual function of these murals as both vehicles of storytelling and instruments of worship. Inscriptions are sometimes found in the narrative space but are usually restricted to the borders separating the narrative registers (Seastrand, 2013).

Within this broader stylistic and regional framework, the Chidambaram murals occupy a crucial position. The narrative programs at the Śivakāmāsundarī shrine, particularly the cycles of the Chidambaram Māhātmya and Chidambaram Purāṇam, demonstrate the careful adaptation of these Tamil idioms to the ritual and spatial environment of a major temple complex. The compositional strategies employed, robust figuration, rhythmic use of colour fields, and clear register divisions, facilitate the unfolding of dense narrative sequences across ceiling bays, while the inclusion of decorative fillers ensures continuity without disrupting narrative legibility. In this respect, the Chidambaram murals not only exemplify the stylistic conventions of the Tamil mural tradition but also extend them, transforming ceiling surfaces into a dynamic narrative field where visual grammar, spatial orientation, and ritual performance converge.



Fig. 1. Narrative murals at the Śivakāmāsundarī shrine in Chidambaram ©Ramakrishnan, 2025

Narrative Sequence Depicted on the Ceiling of the Open Mandapa of Śivakāmasundari Shrine

The mandapa (**Fig. 1**), measuring approximately 26 x 18 metres, is divided into five bays by six rows of pillars. The central bay, the largest, features late 20th century paintings that replaced earlier ones. The remaining four bays house three main narrative cycles. The two northernmost bays depict the Chidambaram Māhātmya or Sthala Purāṇam, a detailed local legend. The second bay from the south illustrates episodes from the Chidambaram Purāṇam by the poet Tirumalainātan (1508), emphasising the spiritual rewards of seeing Naṭarāja in the *Chit Sabhā* and including depictions of regional Shaiva shrines. The

southernmost bay portrays the life of Manikkavachakar, the 9th-century Shaiva poet-saint who ultimately merged with Śiva at Chidambaram (Dappallicola, 2019).

Northernmost Bay (E):

The ceiling of the northernmost bay in the open maṇḍapa unfolds a sacred visual narrative beginning in the bottom register, where Śiva is seated on Mount Kailāsa, flanked by Pārvaṭī and Nārada, with Gaṇeśa also in attendance. Directly above, in the top register, Viṣṇu is depicted in Vaikuṇṭha, seated with Śrīdevī and Bhūdevī, surrounded by celestial beings.

Continuing along the bottom of the next set of panels, Śiva once again appears on Mount Kailāsa with Pārvaṭī, Nārada to his left, and the disciple Ādhikaraṇanandi to his right. Here, Śiva is shown reciting the Kōyil Purāṇam, the sacred story of the Chidambaram temple. Ādhikaraṇanandi listens attentively and later passes the story to Sanatkumāra, the eternal youth. In the top row, the chain of transmission continues: Sanatkumāra narrates the Kōyil Purāṇam to Vedavyāsa, who in turn conveys it to Sūta.

Descending to the bottom row of the next panels, the sages of the Naimiṣa forest are shown listening intently to the sacred story. Above them, in the top row, sage Mādhyandina instructs his son Vyāghrapāda in the Vedas. The young seeker is portrayed yearning to understand the highest form of *tapas* (penance).

In the following panels, the bottom row depicts Mādhyandina and Vyāghrapāda worshipping the Mūlasthanam, the original liṅga shrine of Chidambaram. The sacred geography is emphasised with the depiction of the temple tank and subsidiary shrines. Above, in the top register, the young Vyāghrapāda enters the Tillai forest, a space of divine mystery, where he worships a liṅga, bathes in the tank, and even constructs a temple to enshrine the deity. One poignant vignette portrays him offering flowers, depicted as a heap buzzing with bees.

The bottom register that follows shows Śiva, moved by Vyāghrapāda's devotion, granting him a boon: his hands and feet are transformed into tiger paws with eyes, enabling him to gather the freshest flowers before bees touch them. In the top row, Vyāghrapāda's wedding is depicted, expanding the sage's life story. The subsequent panels continue with the bottom register showing his

son Upamanyu receiving a blessing to drink the milk of the divine cow Surabhi. The top register complements this scene by depicting Upamanyu with his parents near a temple tank, where he is placed before a Śiva shrine and receives the divine Milky Ocean.

Towards the end of the first bay, Vyāghrapāda is depicted in deep meditation before the empty *Chit Sabhā*, the Hall of Consciousness, awaiting the *darśan* of Naṭarāja. The nearby Mūlasthānam is also represented, further grounding the scene in sacred geography. Finally, the cycle culminates with Viṣṇu reclining on Śeṣā, the serpent of infinity. Awakened by thoughts of Śiva's dance, Viṣṇu rises and sits enthroned, flanked again by Śrīdevī and Bhūdevī. Above, Śeṣā approaches the enthroned Viṣṇu with Lakṣmī nearby.

The narrative then seamlessly continues into the ceiling of the second bay, where a cosmic drama unfolds. On Mount Kailāsa, Śiva and Pārvatī receive Viṣṇu in a divine assembly attended by Nārada and Tumburu. In the lower register, Śiva and Viṣṇu, accompanied by their retinues, are depicted walking together toward a pavilion. Above, the transformation begins: Śiva takes the form of Bhikṣāṭana, the seductive mendicant, while Viṣṇu assumes the form of Mohinī, the enchanting maiden. Together with their attendants, they journey to the Dārūka forest, where the sages are absorbed in ritual.

In the bottom register, Bhikṣāṭana entrances the wives of the sages, whose garments slip away under his spell. Yet, amidst this turmoil, Arundhatī, the virtuous wife of Vasiṣṭha, remains untouched, fully clothed and steadfast in her devotion. The top register isolates her presence, showing her serene and alone near the *yajñāśālā*. Meanwhile, the sages, now bewitched by Mohinī, rush toward her in a frenzy of misguided desire. Below, angered by the disruption, the sages gather on either side of the *yajñāśālā*. From their sacrificial fire emerge dangerous beings, a tiger, a snake, *Apasmāra* (the dwarf of ignorance), and a bee, manifestations of their rage.

The following panel depicts these creatures attacking Śiva, who effortlessly transcends them. To the right, he commences the *Ānandatāṇḍava*, the blissful cosmic dance, before Viṣṇu and the assembled devotees. In the bottom register, Śeṣā stands before Viṣṇu with his son. Having heard the Dārūka forest episode, Viṣṇu advises Śeṣā to worship Śiva so that he might one day gain the vision of the cosmic dance. At the side, Śiva is shown returning to Kailāsa, riding his bull, Nandi.

The narrative then shifts to Śeṣā's penance. In the upper register, he is depicted undertaking *pañcāgni tapas*, standing amid five blazing fires. Śiva, disguised as Brahmā, appears to test his sincerity. When Śeṣā proves his devotion, Śiva reveals himself and instructs him to assume the form of Patañjali, the half-serpent sage, and to travel to Nāgaloka. There, atop a mountain, he would encounter Vyāghrapāda, already engaged in worship of the Mūlasthānam at Chidambaram.

The subsequent register depicts Patañjali's arrival at Chidambaram, where he joins Vyāghrapāda in the worship of Anantiśvara and Puliśvara, two manifestations of Śiva. Together, their devotion sanctifies the site. The lower register complements this vision with a group of sages gathered in worship, expanding the sense of collective sanctity.

The cycle culminates with the depiction of the *Chit Sabhā* (Hall of Consciousness) and the *Kanaka Sabhā* (Golden Hall). Here, Śiva finally appears, preparing to perform the Ānandatāṇḍava. Devotees are assembled in anticipation as the universe awaits the revelation of divine rhythm. Surrounding this final vision are lively friezes of Śiva's *gaṇas* and celestial musicians, underscoring the celebratory grandeur of the cosmic dance (Dappalicolà, 2019).

Second Bay from the North (W)

The narrative continues onto the ceiling of the second bay from the northern side (west), unfolding a sacred account that interweaves divine intervention, royal devotion, and the consecration of Chidambaram.

The sequence begins with a scene of Brahmā preparing to conduct a *yajna*. Although the gods are present in Chidambaram, they decline to participate in the ritual. In their place, the sage Vyāghrapāda suggests that the priests of Chidambaram undertake the ritual duties. The following register shifts orientation: on one side, Śivakāmāsundarī appears with her attendants, while on the other, Brahmā is seated before the sacrificial fire, with the *Dikpālas* facing him.

A subsequent scene introduces King Lokeśavikrama with his son Siṃhavarman, who is afflicted with leprosy. Renouncing royal life, the prince pursues asceticism in search of divine grace. The registers depict his wanderings through many countries, worshipping the liṅga. A *Kirāta* (hunter) guides him to

the Tillai forest, where he continues his devotion, as Vyāghrapāda is shown in deep meditation on a nearby hillock.

In another register, the hunter leads the young ascetic to Vyāghrapāda. The youth is shown bowing before the sage, who then guides him toward Chidambaram. Above, a sacred moment unfolds as Patañjali and Vyāghrapāda stand in devotion, witnessing Śiva's cosmic dance, the *Ānandatāṇḍava*. Siṃhavarman and another devotee are also present, their gestures expressing awe before the vision.

The divine revelation leads to Siṃhavarman's transformation. In a lower register, Vyāghrapāda instructs him to bathe in the Śivagaṅgā tank. Emerging from the waters, his diseased skin becomes radiant gold, and he is reborn as Hiraṇyavarman, the "golden one." He is then shown worshipping Naṭarāja, accompanied by Patañjali and Vyāghrapāda. The registers above depict his travels to various sacred sites, continuing his devotion through pilgrimage.

The story moves forward with a scene where Hiraṇyavarman and Vyāghrapāda perform worship before a liṅga. The narrative then transitions to Vyāghrapāda and his wife adopting Hiraṇyavarman as their son. In the upper register, King Lokeśavikrama lies on his deathbed, while the sage Vasiṣṭha is sent to bring the news to Hiraṇyavarman.

The following registers show Vasiṣṭha delivering the message in the company of Vyāghrapāda and Hiraṇyavarman, surrounded by assembled sages. Above, the death of Lokeśavikrama is depicted, after which Vyāghrapāda instructs Hiraṇyavarman to assume kingship and lead his subjects from Antarvedi to Chidambaram, thereby establishing a new sacred and political centre.

The sequence continues with the funeral procession of the deceased king, his body carried to the cremation ground, while Hiraṇyavarman performs the final rites. The upper register depicts the young ruler consulting with sages in Antarvedi, while troops and attendants prepare for the journey southward. This transition is followed by a stately scene of Hiraṇyavarman riding a chariot, leading a grand procession of courtiers and women in palanquins. Although partially damaged, the upper register retains faint outlines of sages and chariots, suggesting the continuation of the pilgrimage. The west wall concludes with an image of Vinādhara Dakṣiṇāmūrti, seated with a *vīṇā* and surrounded by sages

in meditation. The narrative seamlessly extends into the northernmost bay on the west. Here, Vyāghrapāda and Patañjali, together with priests, pay homage to Naṭarāja and Śivakāmasundari in the Chit Sabhā. A four-armed divine figure, though partially damaged, stands nearby.

The following registers depict the royal court, where the coronation of Hiraṇyavarman takes place. Seated among nobles and priests, the Prince is ritually anointed under the direction of Vyāghrapāda and Patañjali. The upper registers show scenes of celebration, where the newly crowned king rides an elephant amid fireworks and festivities, while the lower scenes depict temple construction—likely alluding to his contributions to the sacred complex.

The ceiling narrative then presents a remarkable architectural scene: a plan of the Naṭarāja Temple. At its centre lies the *Chit Sabhā*, the Hall of Consciousness, enshrining the dancing Śiva. The *Kanaka Sabhā* is shown adjacent, along with the shrine of Śivakāmasundarī, subsidiary shrines, and three prominent gopuras. This layout visually anchors the sacred space of Chidambaram within the unfolding story.

Following this is a scene of the Mārgazhi festival, celebrated in December–January. The temple plan becomes the stage for mapping ritual processions, marking the sacred movements of deities across the complex.

The narrative concludes with lively festival registers, showing deities carried on elephants and chariots, preceded by torchbearers, insignia-holders, fireworks, and throngs of worshippers. The regal progress of Naṭarāja and Śivakāmasundari through the streets of Chidambaram brings the Chidambaram Māhātmya to its climactic resolution (Dappallicola, 2019).

Narrative Analysis

In the Śivakāmasundari Shrine, the narrative is meticulously arranged across multiple horizontal registers (**Fig. 2**), creating a deliberate visual structure that guides the viewer's eye. The storytelling begins in the bottom register of the northernmost bay, specifically from the eastern end of the wall. From there, the scenes progress westward within the same register, leading the viewer across the bay.

Once the narrative reaches the western edge of the first bay, it does not continue upward immediately. Instead, it flows into the adjacent bay to the west, the second bay, but begins again from the bottom register on the western side. From this point, the story continues in the opposite direction, moving eastward across the second bay. This method of visual progression forms a distinctive S-shaped pattern (**Fig. 2**), wrapping from one bay to the next in a continuous, snaking motion. Such a deliberate organisation of space and directionality frames the visual field within which the murals operate, shaping how episodes unfold and how the viewer engages with them. Within this spatial framework, the murals employ a complex interplay of narrative strategies that may be examined through the lens of visual narrative grammar, where distinct modes are adapted to suit the thematic and dramatic demands of the storyline. Linear registers structure episodes such as royal consecrations and temple processions into clearly demarcated stages, ensuring chronological precision and didactic clarity. By contrast, the use of continuous-linear narration, where figures are repeated within a single pictorial field, effectively conveys pilgrimage, ritual movement, and the temporal unfolding of devotion across space. Monoscenic compositions punctuate the cycle at climactic junctures, most notably in the depiction of Śiva with Pārvatī and Gaṇeśa and Viṣṇu with Śrīdevī and Bhūdevī, where a singular, monumental scene encapsulates divine revelation and narrative culmination. Directionality itself becomes a narrative device, with shifts between right-to-left, left-to-right, and zig-zag flows aligning the rhythm of the story with the devotee's embodied experience of movement through the shrine. In this way, the murals integrate narrative grammar with spatial and architectural cues, transforming the act of viewing into a participatory process where bodily movement, visual sequencing, and ritual significance coalesce into a unified experience of sacred storytelling.



Fig. 2. Narrative flow on the ceiling of the open mandapa at the Śivakāmāsundarī Shrine in Chidambaram
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Embracing Diaspora Evolution

The narrative opens in the first two registers with simple iconic scenes that establishes the significance of Chidambaram Māhātmya. In the bottom register, Śiva is shown seated on Mount Kailasa, accompanied by Pārvatī and the sage Nārada, with Gaṇeśa (**Fig. 3**) also present in attendance. Above, the top register portrays Viṣṇu in his celestial abode of Vaikuṇṭha, enthroned with Śrīdevī and Bhūdevī by his side, surrounded by attending celestial beings (**Fig. 3**).

The narrative begins in the third panel from the left, employing a continuous linear mode to depict the unfolding of the Chidambaram Māhātmya. In this storytelling technique, successive moments within a single storyline are represented in a shared visual space without distinct framing between episodes.

The opening scene shows Śiva seated on Mount Kailasa, narrating the sacred Mahatmya to Pārvatī, Nārada, and the sage Ādhikaraṇanandi (**Fig. 4**). Rather than isolating this moment from what follows, the artist seamlessly transitions into the next episode within the same register where Ādhikaraṇanandi is now shown passing on the narrative to Sanatkumarā (**Fig. 4**).

While the composition flows left to right in a linear sequence, the absence of explicit frames or borders between the episodes distinguishes this as a continuous narrative. The shift from one moment to the next is subtly indicated through changes in the figure's profile and posture, Ādhikaraṇanandi turns from listening to speaking, and by a change in background colour, visually cueing the viewer to a narrative progression. Then the narrative flows in a continuous linear mode to the top register from right to left which depicts Sanatkumarā recites it to Vedavyāsa, and Vedavyāsa to Suta.

In this register, the narrative sequence showing the transmission of the Chidambaram Māhātmya from Sanatkumarā to Vedavyāsa, and subsequently from Vedavyāsa to Suta, employs the continuous linear narrative mode, a visual strategy where multiple moments in time are depicted within a single, uninterrupted pictorial field.

At first glance, the register appears to present a continuous narrative, with Vedavyāsa appearing twice in succession. This repetition of the same character in different postures signals the progression of the storyline. However, a closer

reading reveals that the register is subtly divided into two narrative segments, each representing a distinct episode in space and time.

The first scene shows Sanatkumarā transmitting the Māhātmya to Vedavyāsa. This exchange is depicted in an interior setting, suggested by the curtains that hang above. Vedavyāsa is rendered in a side profile facing left, directly engaging with Sanatkumarā, which helps define the moment both visually and directionally.

In the second scene, the setting shifts outdoors. Vedavyāsa is now shown in a side profile facing right, seated beneath a tree, as he imparts the sacred narrative to Suta. The tree and open background distinguish this scene as a different spatial and temporal moment from the previous one.

Through the repetition of characters, shifts in their orientation, and the contrast between architectural and natural settings, such as a curtained interior followed by an open landscape, the artist conveys the progression of time and transition of space with nuance. Rather than using rigid frames to separate scenes, these visual cues allow for temporal layering and spatial variation to unfold seamlessly within a continuous pictorial field.



Fig. 3. Lower register: Śiva on Mount Kailasa with Pārvatī, Nārada and Gaṇeśa.

Upper register: Viṣṇu in Vaikuṇṭha with Śrīdevī and Bhūdevī
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Fig. 4. Lower register: Śiva narrating the sacred Mahatmya to Pārvatī, Nārada, and Ādhikaraṇanandi.
Upper register: Ādhikaraṇanandi passing on the narrative to Sanatkumarā. ©Ramakrishnan, 2025

The narrative progresses to the fifth register, which is a monoscenic representation depicting the sages of Naimiṣa forest as they sit attentively, listening to the sacred story (**Fig. 5**). This entire register is filled with their engaged presence, creating a rich, unified scene.



Fig. 5. Lower register: Sages of Naimiṣa forest listening to the sacred story.
Upper register: Sage Mādhyandina teaching the Vedas to his son

In contrast, the sixth register continues the story in a continuous linear narrative format, starting from the right side. Here, we see Sage Mādhyandina teaching the Vedas to his son Vyāghrapāda, who strives to comprehend the highest form of penance (tapas) and subsequently journeys into the forest to pursue his quest (**Fig. 5**). This arrangement closely resembles one of the scenes in the Mucukunda murals, where Viṣṇu hands over the *Tyāgarāja* icon to Indra, with Indra depicted multiple times within the same frame performing different actions. In a similar way, Vyāghrapāda is shown repeatedly, first learning from his father, then prostrating, and finally entering the forest, all within a single, unified space. The overlapping of his figure to connect these scenes helps create a smooth, continuous flow of the narrative, emphasising the progression of time and action without needing separate borders or divisions.

In both the subsequent seventh and eighth registers, the artist maintains a linear progression while employing elements of continuous narrative to guide the story forward. The register opens with Mādhyandina and Vyāghrapāda worshipping the Mūlasthānam, the original liṅga shrine of Chidambaram. Nearby, the temple tank and small shrines help define the setting, adding depth and context. The architectural structures, trees, and pavilions are used not just as backdrops but as visual markers to separate the scenes. Thus creating a smooth flow instead of a rigid, frame-by-frame progression.

A particularly unique feature here is the way the flow of the narrative is manipulated to maintain visual balance across the composition. Traditionally, narrative friezes move from right to left in the bottom row and then reverse direction in the upper row. Here, instead, both the seventh and eighth register move in the same direction, from right to left, which helps create a balanced and unified view. This decision may reflect the artist's intent to keep the natural landscape elements to the left and the architectural structures to the right, thereby guiding the view smoothly across the scenes while preserving a pleasing and stable visual composition.

The progression of time and space is also represented through careful transformation within the scenes. In the seventh register, both Mādhyandina and the young Vyāghrapāda are depicted together, worshipping the liṅga. As the narrative progresses upward to the eighth register, we see Vyāghrapāda depicted as a grown man worshipping the liṅga which is followed by entering the Tillai forest, worshipping a liṅga, bathes in a nearby tank, and constructs a small shrine in its honour, a clear progression of time and space. The register concludes with

a small, intimate scene of Vyāghrapāda in front of a pile of flowers, with bees buzzing around them.

In the 9th and 10th registers, the artist switches from a linear progression to a monoscenic approach. In these scenes, everything happens within a single frame, but there's a clear sense of movement and progression within that space.

Vyāghrapāda is depicted multiple times in different phases of the event, first when he receives a boon from Lord Śiva (**Fig. 6**), then as he shows reverence by prostrating before him, and finally as he offers flowers. This repeated representation of Vyāghrapāda within the same scene makes the visual composition dynamic instead of static.

While the 10th register is a static monoscenic scene depicting the wedding of Vyāghrapāda (**Fig. 6**), it serves as a moment of resolution in the narrative. The composition focuses on a single event, the marriage, with all the main figures presented together in a calm, stable setting. This stands in contrast to the previous register, where movement and transformation were shown within a single frame.



Fig. 6. Lower register: Vyāghrapāda receiving a boon from Lord Śiva
Upper register: The wedding of Vyāghrapāda. ©Ramakrishnan, 2025

Again, there is a noteworthy shift in the narrative mode in registers 11 and 12, which predominantly employ continuous narration while retaining minor traces of the linear mode. This blend reflects a deliberate artistic choice to guide the viewer's understanding of the story.

In register 11, the scene first shows Vyāghrapāda alongside his wife and son, Upamanyu, rendered in a somewhat smaller scale, emphasising their secondary role within the episode. This is immediately followed by a larger scene depicting Upamanyu's rejection of ordinary food after tasting the milk of the divine cow, Surabhi. Importantly, both scenes are presented within a single register without any strong demarcations or borders, creating a fluid, continuous flow in the narrative while retaining slight distinctions in size.

This approach carries forward into register 12, where we see Upamanyu and his parents near a water tank in a somewhat compact representation, after which Vyāghrapāda is shown placing him in front of the Śiva temple in a much larger scene, symbolising the growing importance of the event. The variation in scale serves as a way for the sculptors to guide the viewer's focus toward key moments in the story.

Furthermore, the direction of the narrative itself adds to its complexity: the story moves from right to left in the lower register, then reverses direction and moves from left to right in the upper register. This deliberate reversal signals a shift in the trajectory of the tale and prevents it from becoming monotonous or static. In this way, the artists do not rely on a single narrative mode but instead combine multiple modes to reflect the significance of each event and to create a multilayered visual experience.

The first part of the narrative cycle ends in a monoscenic in register 13 showing Vyāghrapāda in meditation before the empty *Chit Sabhā* awaiting the *darshan* of Naṭarāja. A new chapter unfolds in register 13, where two monoscenic depictions are presented within a single register. In the first scene, Viṣṇu is shown reclining upon Śeṣā and in the subsequent scene, he is stirred by thoughts of Lord Śiva's cosmic dance. He rises from his resting pose and seats himself upon a throne, with Śrīdevī and Bhūdevī by his side. These two scenes are rendered without any physical demarcation, but their division is subtly suggested by the appearance of curtains at the top of the second frame.

This approach is further continued in register 14, the last register located in the northernmost bay (E), which presents another monoscenic representation. Here, Śeṣā is depicted as approaching the enthroned Viṣṇu, with Lakṣmī in close attendance and several attendants surrounding them. This marks the beginning of another episode where Viṣṇu narrates the event that takes place in Dārūka forest.

The narrative seamlessly continues into the ceiling of the second bay where a grand cosmic drama begins to unfold. The scene opens on Mount Kailasa, where Śiva and Pārvatī receive a visit from Viṣṇu (**Fig. 7**). From here on the register the narrative flows in a linear fashion with minimum action, focusing on Śiva taking the form of Bhikṣāṭana while Viṣṇu transforming into Mohinī. This linear narration action continues till the 17th register which depicts two scenes: Arundhati near the *yajñāsālā* (sacrificial hall), serene and alone and the second scene the rishis enchanted by Mohinī, rush toward her in a frenzy of confused desire. These registers are mostly divided into minimum two scenes focusing on the impact of Bhikṣāṭana and Mohinī on the rishis and their wives.



Fig. 7. Śiva and Pārvatī Viṣṇu. ©Ramakrishnan, 2025

The visual momentum picks up in the 18th register with the angered rishis gather on either side of the *yajñāsālā*, one of them tending the sacred fire. From this fire rise dangerous manifestations, a tiger, a snake, *Apasmārapuruṣa*, and a bee, to attack Bhikṣāṭana (**Fig. 8**). This composition is a central focus one which has a *yajñāsālā* with rishis performing the *yajna* and the manifestations attacking Bhikṣāṭana inside the *yajñāsālā* while the other rishis watch the spectacle from both the sides of the register. The artists wanted to highlight the event.

In register 19, the visual narrative shift in tone is marked by a move toward continuous-linear mode, adding a dramatic dimension to the composition, much like a bustling battle scene. This continuous-linear mode falls into a segmented

variant, where the register is subtly divided into separate scenes that collectively tell a sequential story.



Fig. 8. Angered rishis gather on either side of the *yajñāsālā*. ©Ramakrishnan, 2025

The first scene depicts the attack by threatening creatures, their profiles all turning toward the right, suggesting forward movement. This is immediately followed by the subsequent scene, where Bhikṣāṭana is shown after having defeated and subjugated these creatures, a moment of triumph rendered through his poised and calm demeanour. Finally, the narrative transitions to the *Ānandatāṇḍava*, where Bhikṣāṭana performs his cosmic dance (**Fig. 9**).



Fig. 9. Bhikṣāṭana is shown defeating and subjugating the creatures. ©Ramakrishnan, 2025

At first glance, the composition may appear to be one continuous flow, unhindered by borders or framing lines, especially as the curtains at the top of the register remain unbroken and consistent across the scenes. However, subtle visual cues aid the view in distinguishing each moment. These include the change in the profile direction of the figures and the placement of accompanying labels in Tamil, which collectively guide the progression of the story. In registers 20 to 22, the linear narrative mode is used to convey the progression of events in a clear, sequential manner, guiding the view from one moment in the story to the next.

In register 20, the scene depicts Viṣṇu instructing Śeṣā to worship Lord Śiva in order to be blessed with a view of the *Ānandatāṇḍava*, a significant

moment that sets the stage for subsequent events. The narrative then flows forward into register 21, which is divided into three separate frames. This division emphasises the steps in the story's progression, much like a comic strip.

In the first frame, Śeṣā is shown engaged in *Pañchāgni tapas* (**Fig. 10**), a form of rigorous ascetic discipline, demonstrating his growing devotion. The following frame introduces Lord Śiva in disguise as Lord Brahmā, who appears to test Śeṣā's sincerity and resolve, adding an element of trial and transformation to the narrative. Finally, in the last frame, Śiva reveals his true form and explains that the *Ānandatāṇḍava* should be performed or beheld in a proper, auspicious setting.



Fig. 10. Śeṣā engaged in *Pañchāgni tapas*. ©Ramakrishnan, 2025

Just like the previous composition, register 22 also follows a similar pattern of division with a linear progression from right to left, guiding the view through the subsequent phases of the story. This continuation of the linear narrative maintains a strong sense of flow and coherence across the two registers. In this register the story moves forward with Śiva instructing Śeṣā to transform into Patanjali and the register ends with Śeṣā meeting Vyāghrapāda. Registers 23 to 25 employ monoscenic representation to highlight pivotal moments within the ongoing narrative, following a dramatic shift in mode from the previous, more linear progression.

In register 23, the monoscenic flow is contained within a division of three frames, each framing a significant moment, as Patanjali is depicted arriving at Chidambaram and subsequently joining Vyāghrapāda in the worship of Ananteśvara and Pulishva. This careful framing allows for a clear and deliberate segmentation of the narrative.

In contrast, register 24 adopts a pure monoscenic approach, extending across the entirety of the register without any internal divisions. Here, a group of sages is shown collectively engaged in worship, creating a unified and solemn view. The artistic choice to forgo separate framing signals the moment's

collective, all-encompassing significance, reflecting a shift in narrative from individual pilgrimage to communal devotion. This change in mode not only guides the viewer's understanding of the story's progression but also underscores the growing integrated, collaborative nature of the worship in the context of Chidambaram's sacred space.

The narrative reaches its grand culmination in register 25, where the climactic moment of Śiva's *Ānandatāṇḍava* is depicted (**Fig. 11**). This register stands out both in scale and composition, as it is larger than the preceding registers, reflecting the heightened significance of this scene that marks the conclusion of the second episode.

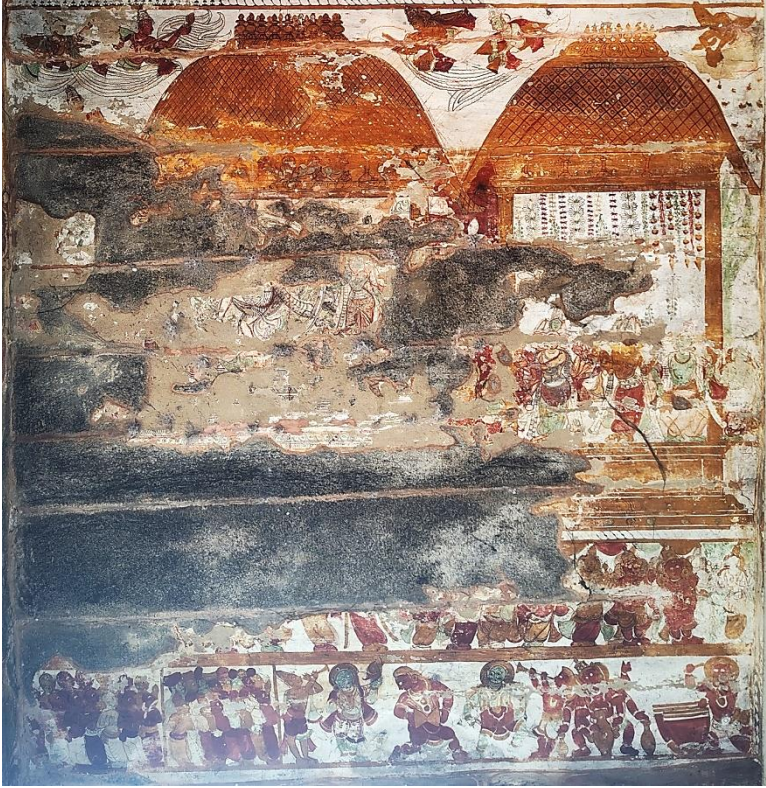


Fig. 11. Śiva's *Ānandatāṇḍava*. ©Ramakrishnan, 2025

Unlike register 24, where a monoscenic mode unified the sages' collective act of worship in a single expansive frame, register 25 employs an innovative horizontal division across three bands. This artistic shift from vertical segmentation, seen in earlier registers with segmented modes, to horizontal layering allows for a striking visual hierarchy.

Interestingly, the first narrative sequence concludes and the second one begins within the same bay, yet the two are distinctly separated by an architectural medallion (**Fig. 12**). This medallion functions both as a spatial divider and as a visual marker, signalling a shift in storyline while maintaining continuity within the larger composition of the murals. Such use of architectural elements to demarcate narrative sections demonstrates the artist's sensitivity to both the built environment and the visual rhythm of storytelling, allowing the viewer to recognise transitions without disrupting the flow of the overall narrative.



Fig. 12. Narrative sequence concludes and the second one begins within the same bay, separated by an architectural medallion. ©Ramakrishnan, 2025

Another striking feature is the directionality of the narrative flow. Unlike the more common left-to-right or top-to-bottom sequences, here the events unfold in a bottom-to-top arrangement (**Fig.13**). This orientation directly corresponds to the movement of devotees entering the shrine: as they step inside and lift their gaze upward, they begin to “read” the story visually.



Fig. 13. Events unfold in a bottom-to-top arrangement.
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In the 27th and 28th panels which starts in the 2nd bay in the north (w), the continuous-linear narrative mode is employed. There is no division of frames, yet the unfolding of events is conveyed seamlessly within a single pictorial field. The progression of the story is shown through the repetition of characters in changing postures and profiles, marking different moments in time. The sequence begins with Brahmā preparing to conduct the *yajna*. Due to the divine assembly at Chidambaram, the gods are unable to attend the ritual. In the 28th register the narrative depicts sage Vyāghrapāda, identifiable through his distinctive features, who advises that the priests of Chidambaram take up the ritual duties. In both the register without spatial partitions, the narrative flows linearly, using character repositioning to indicate temporal progression.

After these two registers the narrative is disrupted by an architectural medallion. The left side of the medallion depicts an Śivakāmasundari with her attendants and on the right side of the medallion we have a register in a linear flow depicting Brahmā sitting before the sacrificial fire, while the Dikpālas face him.

In this register, placed just above the medallion, the artist adopts the linear narrative mode to depict the story in a structured, sequential manner. The register is carefully divided into distinct frames, each representing a separate stage of the unfolding episode moving from right to left. The first frame shows King Lokeshavikrama with his son Siṃhavarman (**Fig. 14**), afflicted with leprosy, while the following scenes depict the prince renouncing his royal life and turning to ascetic practices in search of divine grace to cure his disease. By choosing the linear mode, the artist ensures a clear chronological progression of events.

In the subsequent register, the artist shifts to a continuous-linear narrative mode to portray Prince Siṃhavarman's wandering pilgrimage (**Fig. 15**). Unlike the previous strictly linear division into frames, here the composition flows across the register without formal borders. The prince's figure is repeated multiple times, each instance showing him in different locations engaged in the act of worshipping the liṅga. The repetition of the protagonist within the same visual field creates a sense of movement and progression through time.

To subtly structure the sequence, the artist employs natural elements, particularly trees, as visual markers that function like dividers. These serve to separate episodes within the same pictorial space, signalling the passage from one site of devotion to another. This approach effectively combines the clarity of

linear sequencing with the fluidity of continuous narration, allowing the viewer to follow the prince's spiritual journey across multiple places in a single unfolding visual frame. Through this continuous-linear strategy, the artist conveys both the temporal progression of events and the spatial journey of the prince, embodying his persistence and devotion in seeking divine grace.



Fig. 14. King Lokeshavikrama with his son Simhavarman. ©Ramakrishnan, 2025



Fig. 15. Prince Simhavarman's wandering pilgrimage. ©Ramakrishnan, 2025

As the narrative advances into the upper registers, the artist consciously shifts from a continuous-linear mode (used earlier to show Simhavarman's wandering pilgrimage across multiple spaces) to a linear mode that emphasises precision and clarity. This change reflects a transition in the storyline itself, from the prince's open-ended quest across landscapes to a series of decisive encounters and transformative events.

In the linear mode, each episode is contained within a frame, isolating the action and guiding the viewer step by step. The sequence begins with Simhavarman's meeting with Kirāta (the hunter), who leads him to Vyāghrapāda (**Fig. 16**), and then to Chidambaram to witness the cosmic dance of Naṭarāja. Each subsequent register continues this framing method: Vyāghrapāda and other sages are shown instructing the prince to bathe in the sacred Śivagaṅgā tank, an

while simultaneously showing troops and attendants preparing for the impending journey (**Fig. 18**). The repetition of figures within the same pictorial field, without rigid framing, emphasises the continuity of action and creates a flowing visual rhythm.

In the following lower register, this rhythm intensifies as Hiraṇyavarman is depicted leading a stately procession. He rides in a chariot at the forefront, followed by an entourage of courtiers and women carried in palanquins, all aligned in a horizontal sequence. The composition suggests a forward movement across space, almost cinematic in effect, where the repeated yet varied figures create a sense of momentum. By employing the continuous mode here, the artist avoids fragmenting the procession into separate episodes; instead, the visual field becomes a single, unified scene that conveys the scale, formality, and ceremonial dignity of the journey towards Chidambaram.



Fig. 18. Hiraṇyavarman consulting the sages at Antarvedi. ©Ramakrishnan, 2025



Fig. 19. Hiraṇyavarman leading a stately procession. ©Ramakrishnan, 2025

The subsequent six panels have disappeared, making it difficult to decipher the events and the narrative strategies once employed there. This absence marks the end of one bay, from which the narration shifts into the northernmost bay. Here, the sequence opens with a scene depicting sages along with Vyāghrapāda and Patañjali paying homage to Naṭarāja and Śivakāmasundari. From this point, the

narrative begins to flow in a top-to-bottom direction, organising the episodes across successive registers. The first major event is the coronation of Hiraṇyavarman, which occupies the top two registers. Although visually divided, these two parts in fact form a single extended register depicting one continuous event. The lower section presents the ritual coronation ceremony performed by Vyāghrapāda and Patañjali, while the upper section portrays the noblemen and courtiers assembled to witness the occasion. Following the coronation, Hiraṇyavarman is shown riding an elephant as the people celebrate his consecration with joy and fireworks. The next register depicts construction activity at the Chidambaram temple, probably an allusion to his contribution towards its renovation and extension, undertaken in gratitude to Śiva for curing him and legitimising his kingship. This is followed by a larger register that presents a visual plan of the Chidambaram temple complex, complete with its sub-shrines. The narrative then concludes with two expansive registers that depict the grand celebration of the Mārgazhi festival in Chidambaram, bringing together ritual, festivity, and collective devotion as the culminating note of the visual story.

Conclusion

The murals of the Śivakāmasundari shrine present a masterful orchestration of narrative strategies, spatial arrangements, and visual rhythm. Through the interplay of linear, continuous, continuous-linear, and monoscenic modes, the artists adapt their approach with remarkable sensitivity to the demands of each episode, whether it is the intimate transmission of the Chidambaram Māhātmya, the spiritual journey of Vyāghrapāda, or the cosmic grandeur of Śiva's *Ānandatāṇḍava*. Directionality is employed with equal deliberation, alternating between right-to-left, left-to-right, and even S-shaped sequences. This fusion of architectural movement and visual narrative produces a participatory mode of viewing, where the devotee's physical journey mirrors the spiritual ascent of the protagonists.

Equally significant is the integration of architectural and natural elements, curtains, medallions, trees, pavilions, and temple tanks, which function not merely as background details but as visual markers that structure time, space, and transition. Such orchestration ensures that the narrative retains clarity without losing fluidity. The artists transform the walls of the shrine into both a sacred text and a performative space, guiding the viewer through an experience that is at once aesthetic, devotional, and didactic.

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The Weight of Laughter and Forgetting: Ghostly Occupancy and the Disghosted Self in the Works of Tarashankar Bandopadhyay

Anuja Dutta

Abstract

The socio-cultural currents of haunting have always been a persistently quiet yet deeply provocative social presence, often neatly tucked away into the folds of romantic nostalgia and private obsessions. The relegation of spirits and their spiritual mechanisms into the realms of melancholia results in a deliberate occlusion of its historicity and transparent authenticity as custodians of personal and public memory. As a phenomenon, spectrality has arrived late to the language of geography and space. My work studies the uncanny 'others' of Tarashankar Bandopadhyay (1898-1971), a noted Indian novelist from Bengal, celebrated for his piercing reflections on the marginal and the outcast in literature. For the purposes of this essay, I primarily look at spectrality as situated in the affective intersections of horror and humor, and how material conditions incorporate the specter into the economy of the dwelling. Positing the conditions of spectral occupancy as grounded in risk, I argue that comic incongruities/interventions in the supernatural, aside from displacing the fear principle attached to specters, may reveal internal existential tensions which may not appear as light-hearted and liberating to provoke laughter. Instead, conditions of haunting and spectral (non)presence may help unearth modernity's repressions by culturally mobilising 'ghosts' as a metaphor of alienation.

Keywords: Comic, Labour, Spectral, Tarashankar, Uncanny

Introduction

The human condition, it seems, is simultaneously a ghostly and a *disghosted*¹ one. It is irrevocably tied to a circuit of past memories which does not quite achieve coherence in the present moment, turning the flow of continuity into a ruptured fabric of endless 'returns'. Ghosts, wraiths, phantoms, specters – or any other name we ascribe to institutes of 'has-beens' yet 'still-there's – are truisms not merely as cultural phenomena, but political forces of upheaval. Julian Wolfreys puts bones on this shadowy idea of spectrality (or rather, the problem of defining it) by stating that the spectral is a 'concept without a concept':

[the] identification of spectrality appears in a gap between the limits of two ontological categories. The definition escapes any positivist or constructivist logic by emerging between, and yet not as part of, two negations: *neither nor*... [The] spectral as *other* in this case is not, then, simply a dialectical figure, that which returns from the dead for example to haunt life as simply the opposite of life... [it is] strictly speaking, neither alive nor dead, even though this condition...is intimately enfolded in our understanding of life and death (x-xi).

Considering categorical distinctions of birth and death are historically sacrosanct, any concept arising from its limits or in-between are bound to generate cultural responses of dread and anxiety at worst and a modicum of curiosity at best. Often, the rise of a literary genre is identified by a certain range of emotions it is most adept in exploiting through reading, as much as the characters which inhabit them. If fear is the 'oldest and strongest emotion of mankind' and the 'oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown' (Lovecraft 1927), then the rise of supernatural fiction as an autonomous body of literature tapping into that unknown is a relatively later phenomenon. This is not to say that stories of mystery and terror have survived for a really long time without a loyal clientele. But there is a huge difference between emphasising fear as the binding principle for certain tales' popularity and an entire sub-genre of literature emerging from the coalescence of similar tales arguably based, at least theoretically, on the fear principle.

Putting forth arguments for the importance of supernatural fiction is not easy. How does one proceed to argue about something which can only appear in

¹ I borrow the term from James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* (1978).

its repudiation? And how can the present materialist moment prove commodious enough for the apparently immaterial? The paradoxes amplify and its defenses are deemed too inconclusive. No wonder that the popular success of this fiction whose position is ‘more marginal than elevated in the hierarchy of literary genres’ has been treated more as a ‘spread or even a contagion’ than a ‘triumphal progress through time’ (Clery 1). Notwithstanding its marginal status, a variety of literary works based on the unknown has continued to widen its networks through time and solidify itself under the genus of ‘supernatural fiction’. From the early Gothic novel of the eighteenth century accompanied by its (nec)romancing traditions to the dawn of the ‘weird tale’ of cosmic horror which stretched the unknown to intergalactic dimensions of space-time and alien life, supernatural fiction houses within itself a virtually inexhaustible range of signifieds. But if a local² history of the supernatural is attempted by tracing horror trajectories in literature, the genre becomes thinly spread out over selective texts instead of an integrated whole of co-dependent yet salient narrative traditions. There are multiple elements of supernaturalism in Bengali horror literature but no consensus as to whether their sole presence can legitimately serve as the benchmarks of a rising genre. The only solution is to tread with caution.

The reason why I use ‘supernatural fiction’ and not phrases like ‘tales of terror’ is because, firstly, ideations of supernaturalism are not restricted to the ‘terrifying’ per se. Secondly, the troubled entry of the supernatural into otherwise commonplace or mundane domains of existence cannot be treated as descriptive addendums or ‘deviations from the rational principle’ but can only somewhat serve as its skeletal premise, a setting of stage of sorts. The supernatural may borrow social and political concerns from the ‘real’ but may not be subservient to the bindings of realism. Pramathanath Bishi, one of the very few Bengali academicians, heeded the marginal position of the *aloukik*³ in the hierarchy of ‘*rasa*’s⁴ in the Bengali literary tradition and insisted that the term ‘*bhautik rasa*’ is

² By local, I specify the Bengali vernacular tradition which didn’t successfully witness the rise of an autonomous genre called ‘supernatural fiction’ as opposed to solidified cultural/genre commodities like ghost stories, detective novels, or crime fiction.

³ Colloquially, the term denotes the supernatural. If close translations are followed, ‘*aloukik*’ can also mean otherworldly; it serves as the nearest cultural equivalent of the more anglicized terminology ‘supernatural fiction’.

⁴ The conventions of Sanskrit and classical Bengali aesthetics often rested on the concept of ‘*rasa*’ – literally translated as ‘flavor’ or ‘essence’ characteristic of any work, composition, or emotional state. The predominance of one (or more) *rasa* often dictated how any literary text should be

sensationally incomplete, that we should increasingly move towards identifying stories of the supernatural vis-à-vis '*aloukik rasa*'. He treated this last variant as a spectrum: 'just as an analysis of light reveals different colors, '*aloukik rasa*' is a composite of various elements or beliefs. Mystery, the thrill of gooseflesh, a disquieting silence, or outright horror, etc. all comprise the overt or covert manifestations of this *rasa*' (Bishi 6).⁵ Thus, the spectral is reinforced not through a predominance of *specters* but through a *spectrum* or range of emotions which help us access the unknown within the limits of our material conditions. Likewise, the traditional ghost story dissociates from the cult of '*aloukik sahitya*' while simultaneously getting subsumed by it. The former rests on the periodic intrusions of a specific haunting figure into the chronology of everyday while the latter can sustain mechanisms of haunting by referential frameworks unoccupied – sometimes literally – by the figure of the ghost. The specter may come and go as it please but the spectral remains – as a 'constituent element of modern social life... [and] neither [a] pre-modern superstition nor [any] individual psychosis... To study social life one must confront the ghostly aspects of it' (Gordon 7).

In this essay, I shall try and explore how essential the logic of fear is for the supernatural in fiction to retain its somber integrity. I study how the affective principle of the supernatural can stretch itself to incorporate dualisms of horror and humor as equally legitimate narrative and affective outcomes. Having been categorised as each-other's emotional opposite or *other*, the events leading up to the climax of laughter and terror can sometimes be simplistically thought to be set in fundamentally differing sources or events. But the principles of affective networks may not be so dichotomous. Multiple accounts emphasising the '*aloukik*' has been written, but textual strategies 'humour'ing the spectral have rather been the exception than the norm when it comes to the supernatural's inexorable tendencies towards the ominous and the strange. There are multiple reasons in the South Asian spectral milieu for a *littérateur* like Tarashankar Bandopadhyay (1898-1971) to 'return' and demand a reappraisal, as revenants often do. But a reason far less likely to initiate such a reappraisal would be an

intellectually perceived. The '*adirasa*' or the original, first *rasa* is '*shringara*' primarily denotes the aesthetics of love and eroticism. Others include '*karuna*', '*hasya*', '*roudra*', '*bibhishika*' (or '*bibhatsa*'), '*adbhut*', '*veera*', and '*shanta*' – outlining feelings of compassion, humor, anger, horror, wonder (merging with the 'weird'), courage, and tranquility, respectively. Together they comprise the classical conglomerate of the '*navarasa*' or the nine essences. Note that there is no space provided for the '*aloukik*' in this aesthetic scheme which indicates its relatively later birth and composite character.

⁵ Translation mine.

investigation of the shared resonance of horror and humour in his spectral narratives. The comic and the spectral are congruous in the sense both erupt from an anomalous condition – a situation of how things are *not* supposed to be, yet effortlessly *are*. It is this creative tension between two existential possibilities that can either jerk us to laughter or make us recoil in fear or disgust, based on contingent factors like where and *how* the supernatural unfolds.

How we think of places crucially determines how we affectively recall its supernatural associations. This will be a recurring argumentative premise of my work, whereby I shall maintain that spaces become increasingly ambivalent and psychodynamic in cultural imagination and it is through such spatial dynamics that the subject of spectrality is primarily broached. While scholarly meditations on the supernatural have juggled for centuries with forces of scientific verity, ocular authority, parapsychology, and a certain wide-eyed wonder of the mystic occult sciences that confounded more than it answered, the ‘*aloukik*’ in Bengali literature was predicated on a more sinister ‘turn’: transforming the ‘*geospatial*’ into the ‘*geospectral*’ (McCorristine 2018). Building on the idea of space as a ‘point of departure for spectral geographies’ (McCorristine 51), I argue that the supernatural in fiction is informed, primarily, by the triangulating forces of wilderness or untameable space, architecture or built or ordered space, and the spatial disorientation characteristic of the modern *unheimlich* (Freud 1919), or the uncanny as a sensorial appendage. I return to author Pramathanath Bishi’s harmless banter on ghostly narratives which ever so gently touched upon this triangulation:

Writers of the modern era invariably move away from Calcutta while attempting stories of the ‘*aloukik*’. Usually the Santhal districts in the interiors of Bihar, Hazaribagh, and Chhotanagpur areas. These are the staple destinations of Bengalis for regaining their health. (Do ghosts too frequent these places for the same reason?) Maybe the support of a backdrop is needed, set in an unspecified, even *distant* time (4-5).

The spatial logic resurfaces. Haunting necessitates a ‘locale’, which in turn, sets the stage for the spectral to play out and rehearse. Now, we do not know if this movement away from the urban site to its rural interiors is a literal movement in terms of physical distantiation or whether it involves an intellectual shift in cognition as well; implying that the more we shift places, the more our sense of surroundings *displace*. If, as Pramathanath Bishi suggests with a chuckle, the urban is so inhospitable a condition for the spectral to thrive that the writers

have to retreat to more conducive zones of the rural or semi-urban, then a valorisation of locale naturally seems to be in order. This can serve as a crucial entry-point into the representations of the colonial and postcolonial settlements of the country and city in spectral narratives.

The aura of '*distantness*' which 'bring into material proximity something which is felt to be inaccessibly remote' (Bendix 473) plays out in these locational shifts from the city to the country (and vice-versa) where 'a liminal realm [is constructed] between factuality and fiction... and where the subtle magical power of words evokes the supernatural' (Valk & Sävborg 7). Since the country and the city were visualised through landscape descriptions native to their spatial distribution, structures, vegetation, residential patterns, and human geographies, the spectral too had to navigate these routes. If the desolate moors of the countryside were thought to be 'better-tuned' to the otherworldly frequencies because they blocked out the static of the city, it should be noted that the same principle successfully bombarded the pictorial depiction of the country as 'robust' or 'idyllic' – a scenic logic which ironically inspired hellish narratives. Visual images of the rural were always comprised between 'the idyllic pastoral haunt of the nationalist imagination and the fallen social space calling for nationalist reform' (Chakrabarty 130). Likewise, unpopular visuals of the city as a swelling tide of alienated labor, impoverished bodies, sweatshops of economic hardship, and poorly-lit alleyways snaking through the shadows of run-down buildings only conveyed part of the spatial corruption seeping through the moral life of its residents. Beyond the tireless visual of urban space writhing under capitalist degeneracy, what served as an equally potent and irresistible image was that of the solitary pedestrian – beautifully blending in, anonymously, unsupervised – into an impersonal crowd of multitudes, and claiming their selfhood in a quiet, unceremonious moment of personal freedom. Raymond Williams underlines this appeal in no ambiguous terms:

[The] pulse of the recognition is still unmistakable...[the] excitement of so many people, with so many purposes. I have stood in many cities and felt this pulse: this identifiable and moving quality: the centre, the activity, the *light*... in these centres of settled and often magnificent achievement (5).

A shift to the city necessitated its own share of enchantments, alternately serving as an antidote or a subterfuge to its harsher aspects. The content of spectrality is determined not only by spatial and scenic ruptures between the rural-urban but also by the historical shifts within which such spaces are inscribed. For

Tarashankar Bandopadhyay, the spectral takes a ‘migratory’ route; spatial tensions are visibly heightened as the borders around land are redrawn in the wake of the Bengal Partition in 1947. Amidst these spectral wastelands roams Tarashankar’s intrepid explorer *Ramkali Babu* – a disillusioned ghosthunter foraging the remnants of past lands and his ancestral village rapidly undergoing transformation in the climate of India’s post-Independence industrialisation fervour. For a writer whose roots in realism went deep⁶, the narrator’s encounters with the ‘ghost realm’ revealed that the metaphysical world is yet to go beyond the laws governing the physical world. The distribution of specters among ‘shadow economies’ of space or actual lives becomes an ‘out-Of-place’ exercise in location reminding us that it is not necessary ‘to speak of ghosts figuratively, or *only* figuratively: the distinction between literal and figurative ghosts is tricky at best’ (Smajić 19). A study of the urban condition – particularly, the experience of homelessness informing that condition – guides us from the home to the unhomely, revealing spatio-temporal anxieties ingrained in postcolonial texts of haunting which turned modernity’s newfound flourish into freedom an ideal breeding ground for displaced ghosts. ‘The prefix *Un* is the token of repression’, says Freud (1919: 15), and by extension, its disquieting return. Made up of obsessive turns and wanderings, returns contribute to a delirious effect when the world as we know and inhabit, starts appearing strange. Freud outlines this feeling of spatial disorientation in a memory:

Strolling one hot summer afternoon through the empty and to me the unfamiliar streets of a small Italian town, I found myself in a district about whose character I could not long remain in doubt. Only heavily made-up women were to be seen at the windows of the little houses, and I hastily left the narrow street at the next turning. However, after wandering about for some time without asking the way, I suddenly found myself back in the same street, where my presence began to attract attention. Once more I hurried away, only to return there again by a different route. I was now seized by a feeling that I can only describe as uncanny, and I was glad to find my way back to the piazza that I had recently left and refrain from any further voyages of discovery. Other situations that share this feature of the unintentional return [can be]... groping around in the dark in an unfamiliar

⁶ See Dhruvakumar Mukhopadhyay’s essay ‘Tarashankarer Upanyase Deshkal’ on the political life and times of the author foregrounding a harsh materialist logic in his texts. *Paschimbanga: Tarashankar Bandopadhyay Sangkhyā*, Tathya O Sanskriti Bibhag: Paschimbanga Sarkar, 1997, pp. 149-168.

room, searching for the door or the light-switch and repeatedly colliding with the same piece of furniture – a situation that Mark Twain has transformed, admittedly by means of grotesque exaggeration, into something irresistibly comic (144).

‘The correlation between movement and progress is broken and the subject succumbs to a feeling of ungroundedness and spatio-temporal disjointedness’ (Blanco & Peeren 396). What is crucial about these uncanny repetitions is their knack of turning genuine moments of distress into comedy (Cixous 540). The comic element is not always encountered as a barrel of laughs that releases emotional tension but more as an ironic self-bemusement reflecting ‘the ineradicable contradictoriness of being... [and] the subtle ironies of self-construction’ (Kaviraj 226). While the jocular mode of narration is undeniably elemental to Tarashankar’s specters, the nature of such humour is always unsure. We know when to laugh but not how long it would last. The repetitive principle of the comic is interrupted by its potential to invite unknown terrors at every turn. The narrator’s method of introducing the ‘comic element routinely dislocates fear, thereby turning us victims of our own sentiment’ (Das Chaudhuri 172). I argue that if there is indeed a collapse of our defenses when we laugh, it is equally plausible for the comic in the supernatural to open floodgates of buried trauma and pain; the spectral shall be ‘humour’ed by examining the disintegrating logic of what it suppresses instead of what gets released by the means of a laugh. So laugh we shall, but we shall do so with a hint of caution. Laughter is no laughing matter, after all.

Spectral Self and Servitude: Uncanny Occupants, Unaccounted Labour

17 April 1969, Tarashankar Bandopadhyay brings us to the interior domains of spectral occupancy. *Ramkali Babu* recounts the night an especially strong thunderstorm disrupted his journey from Labhpur to Calcutta while stranding him in the confines of the train-station. Telephone wires, electricity poles, telegraph posts, and train lines have been severely blocked plunging the world into literal darkness and effectively sealing any hope of communication from outside. As our narrator frantically seeks refuge for the night in the platform, the first news of casualty to reach him is a non-human one:

I felt someone flung open the bathroom door and rush past wailing: “*Buni!* Dear, you got crushed beneath a tree. Oh my *Buni!* Did I not warn you not to stay in the forest? Shouldn’t you have fled during this blasted storm?”

Words wafted from the corners of the bathroom. Who speaks – *Kuni*? I remembered two she-ghosts my mother once told me about. *Kuni* stayed in the corners of a room, *Buni* stayed in the jungle (8-9).

Although *Buni*'s death is recounted as an ecological mishap, she and her sister *Kuni*'s spatial configurations – and their eventual exorcisms – are subject to the conventional wisdom offered by modern urbanism or architecture that required 'dark spaces' to be flooded with light, the near-surgical opening up of spaces to a circulation of light and air, to a panoptic principle of transparent vision (Vidler 167-175). Ghostly demise and discontinuation is not natural but purely accidental, anthropogenic in nature: the felling of trees, clearing of forested tracts, demolition of old houses and desensitised renovation of space pushing for modern conveniences. Ghostly occupancy and the eviction of resident specters thus steers us towards a study of 'domesticity and its discontents', 'the unsettling qualities of contemporary architecture – its fragmented and neoconstructivist forms mimetic of dismembered bodies' (Vidler ix-x), and the conditions of estrangement borne out through such spatial arrangements. If *Kuni* and *Buni*'s unfortunate ends are tied to an intolerant anthropogenic attitude towards specters, then the modern *heimlich* – as the homely cultural space within which such attitudes are birthed – is symptomatic of a 'fundamentally unlivable modern condition' (Vidler x). The Freudian *uncanny* thus emerges as a spatial metaphor underlining a perpetual state of 'modern disquiet' suggestive of the urban. The disquietude or [sub]urban alienation that Tarashankar alludes to the killing or ousting of spectral residents has less to do with a human terror of the supernatural and more with a chronic anxiety arising from inhabiting a space, for instance, the mechanisms of claustrophobic horror and spatial estrangement that emerged as troubled bedfellows of experiencing the uncanny as a shared social ailment. 'The metropolitan uncanny was increasingly conflated with metropolitan illness, a pathological condition that potentially afflicted the inhabitants of all great cities...The uncanny here became identified with all the phobias associated with spatial fear, including... agoraphobia, soon to be coupled with its obverse, claustrophobia' (Vidler 6).

Reclining in an armchair one night, *Ramkali Babu* rues the modern moment of alienated spectrality:

Now that the ghosts have vanished, how would we live? The *neem* tree near my house has been cut. The palm tree-tops weep for the *ekanores*.⁷ The thicket near *shalpukur*'s waters cry for the *mechhuni*.⁸ I listened to those weepings. I grabbed the transistor radio, tuning its needle to the frequencies of Calcutta, Shiliguri, Delhi, Bombay, Pakistan – Peking – one after the other. I do not feel at ease. The clock strikes eleven. The radio shuts down. Everything is silent. Stars in the sky, man and beasts on earth – fishes, snails, oysters, whales, and sharks in the sea – birds and insects on the trees, everything remains save ghosts! (184)

Each locale – an erstwhile haunt of specters – is marked by the loss of its inhabitants whose ousting or exorcism turns these zones into vacated spaces. It is not a relatively simple case of various environmental pockets serving as ghostly quarters but that of spectral presences making these spaces *heimlich*, or familiar. What is *unheimlich* instead is their quietude, their voluntary retirement from the social, which does not sit particularly well with the narrator's intellectual disposition. The incorporeal specter, thought to be incorporated into the very economy of the dwelling (Wolfe 7) has heightened the moment of modern disquiet by its exit instead of dispelling it. The element of fear crystallised around the figure of the phantom liquefies; an affliction, ache takes over – like encountering an empty room of a stranger one had eventually learned to live with despite differences. Elizabeth Wilson talks about the 'horrors of vacuity': how a house should *always* be inhabited, non-inhabitation can be experienced as a particularly disturbing phenomenon inconducive to the idea of stability that a dwelling conveys. In *Ramkali Babu*'s case, it is the inhabitation of specters which is indicative of a dwelling's livability. Spatial vacuum or emptiness emptied of its spectral potential can thus become doubly threatening, especially if the vacuum is the residue of modernist planning.

A century-old lady ghost of the *Banik* household complains to *Ramkali Babu* about the various 'whims' of the government post-Independence that robbed her of her rightful haunt. This was the socialist era of setting lofty goals of economic progress; 'the establishment of social ownership of the means of production, then identified with state ownership' (Brass 4) enshrined as the ideal of good governance. Adequate financing of the public sector [to be] implemented by the Five-Year Plans dreamed of steering the nation into a home-grown,

⁷ A male-ghost who has lost or injured its leg and now walks with a limp.

⁸ A she-ghost with an affinity for catching, eating, and smelling of raw fish.

heavily industrialised economy of self-sufficiency. The crisis of spectral representation vis-à-vis major spatial reorganisation and growth is tied to the national aspiration of visualising the country as embedded within ambitious, larger-than-life architectural projects of building big factories, big dams, massive steel and power plants, and a host of peripheral built structures cementing the belief that political sovereignty meant nothing without unleashing a nation's industrial potential. Amidst constitutional oaths of secularism, the state emerged as supreme, theoretically the only power worth being subservient to. Outdated feudal orders of *zamindari* were removed, economic hierarchies of untouchability, forced labour, lack of property, succession, or land rights feeding into and strengthening existing orders of caste and gender inequalities were forced to adopt a gradual, more reformist, and egalitarian legislative language. The archaic ghost of the landlady (*Ramkali Babu* calls her '*Ginnima*')⁹ echoes the spectral consequences of such shifts in political power, sovereign status, and new legislation:

These are whimsical times for our country, my child, we got freedom; *zamindari* went; landholdings went; suddenly everyone became equal. So much so that one dare not discriminate between bearded goats and smaller varieties. Brahmins, most of all, landed in a soup of inequality. This *bandarbari*¹⁰ was put up for sale. Bought by an upstart, seizing on the winds of change, he stuffed gunpowder into its chambers and blew it up. Razed it to the ground to build – what do you call it now – factories! (196)

The effects of an amputated freedom, according to *Ramkali Babu's* spectral spokespersons, left little physical space for outmoded structures of haunted buildings. The 'supposedly obsolete and irrelevant' marginal spaces – in tandem with the logic of productive regeneration – are 'tirelessly dispensed with.' But the logic of production 'always generates its negative, a formless spatial and material excess which rebukes dreams of unity' (Edensor 833). The language of leftover or 'material excess' also draw attention to the 'insecure sanctuaries' of old or ruinous buildings – structurally unsound, embarrassing roadblocks, and sterile zones of unrealised economic potential hindering the paeon of progress. Maybe to partially soothe the condemnation of non-productivity hurled at the ancients,

⁹ A reverential term used for aged, married women exercising considerable power over the quotidian planning and execution of numerous household affairs ranging from kitchen duties to managing accounts.

¹⁰ Literally meaning a porthouse.

the nomadic figure of Tarashankar's ghost is turned into a labouring body within the economy of such dwellings. Rather being preoccupied with the invisible 'work' of haunting, they are recast within more utilitarian purposes of 'productive' work, endowed with a resilient work ethic despite precarious housing conditions and persistent threats of homelessness. Tarashankar's celebrated '*Ramai Bhoot*' (1972), for instance, is the classic example of a 'productive labourer': '[he] is benign (he voluntarily agrees not to frighten his family members); he is profitable (because he guards the harvest in the fields when his brother is away); he is domestic (since he prefers to stay along with his family and tend to household jobs, for instance, baby sitting his nephew when its mother is busy with chores' (Das Chaudhuri 214). Upon being chided by his widowed sister, *Chandi Dashi*, that *Ramai*'s spectral body is indeed 'use'-less, he instantly sets out to prove his efficiency and returns with four baskets of sweetened delicacies all the way from *Kandi*'s palatial estate. *Ramai* may be relegated to the realm of the ancients in an era of disenchantment that has no 'use' for specters but his tales are recounted under the logic of functionality as a font of useful, industrious energy faithful and vigilant to the needs and reproduction of the domestic sphere. 'Ghosts engender fantasies of free and efficient labour' (Briefel 226); the long-standing 19th and 20th century British weekly magazine *The London Charivari*, better known as 'Punch', appeared quite unbarred in their spectral productive fantasies:

There seems to be no limit to [the ghost's] accomplishments. We suppose we shall have spirits next who will cut our hair, and shave us, and call us early in the morning, and cook our breakfasts, and run errands, and answer our correspondence for us. In fact, why not keep a Spirit-of-all-work in the house; one who should combine the respective offices of maid, cook, valet, *commissionaire*, boots, and secretary? It would be very serviceable, would get over the perpetual annoyance of domestics, and would effect a material saving in wages in the course of the year... One of the most remarkable things is, that these Spirits do not require anything to eat or drink. There is no agreement required for tea or sugar... They live on air (159).

The ideal labouring body is the spectral one, requiring no nourishment, financial compensation, or meticulous training. Their 'aerial' movement significantly eliminates the physical drudgery of muscular action required for heavy chores, often painfully accentuating the restricted potential of human labour, pitting its natural propensity for rest or idleness against the supernatural property of absolute and unmitigated efficiency. One wonders if it is the endlessly

industrious and profitable character of specters that prevents them from adequately developing a frightening aura in Tarashankar's texts, as existential conditions of prolonged servitude do not naturally inspire spiritual reverence. If specters do possess qualities that can make wondrous workers out of them, one wonders if they too – as sensational beings – feel the urge to unionise, revolt, and 'fraternize every evening, over and above their differences, in the ancient community of dream and fatigue' (Camus 36) rallying for historical changes in their material circumstances of haunting.

Ghostly labour as a key contributor to fantasies of domestic production addresses a return to 'traditional family values, which were being overturned by modern industry' (Weikart 660). The *unheimlich* potential inherent in the inception of modern industry at once led to an overabundance and a disowning of specters – a frustrating paradox of social annihilation and social supply. The traditional family, on the other hand, has been the historical site of alienation and exploitation which gradually gave rise to notions of private property and gendered division of labour. Intimately tied to the home and the *heimlich*, the situation of specters in such an economy becomes awkward. The 'family house', as early as the 19th century, was in fact 'born out of impossible bourgeois dreams of domesticity', masquerading 'as an idealised moral refuge invested with secure gendered roles, ideals of cleanliness, and household order' (Edensor 835). On one hand, specters stirred up fantasies of unmitigated energy, and on the other hand, that productive energy was tied to the circuit and service of a bourgeois domestic unit that accommodated spectral energy insofar as it successfully exploited. The haunted mansion or the family house is not just a metaphor of structural alienation extending itself to encapsulate analogies of the incorporeal, but its 'hollows and voids are occupied by bodies that replicate internally the external conditions of political and social struggle, and are likewise assumed to stand for, and identify, the sites of such struggle' (Vidler 167).

Such expositions should not translate to a belief that the afterworld is better attuned to the egalitarian concerns of social justice. Death might be the great leveler, but multiple attestations to the supernatural have time and again highlighted that the spectral world is as intensely stratified and volatile a realm as the world it leaves behind. The social relations structuring the last vestiges of the 'family home' can never be completely exorcised unlike the spectral inhabitants who are 'caught in a contradiction between a society's archaic conception of itself and burgeoning needs to recast it' (Das Chaudhuri 204). What becomes of the prospect of haunting vis-à-vis reclaiming marginal zones as 'home' if the very

materialism of both is rooted in an existential condition of estrangement? If the performing spectral body becomes irreducible to an anomaly of the traumatised vision, figments of a diseased mind, or a comic spectacle entertaining a sanitised bourgeois gaze, but rather an extension of a pervasive modern malaise of social disorientation, then does a spectral *becoming* – simultaneously hint at – a possibility of a ‘realization of an ideal of authentic personality?’ (O’Neill 83) If specters are historical continuums too (much like the ruins they gravitate to), then they are still in the process of being eroded, deconstructed while accumulating layers of time, which may gradually reveal their skeletal foundations. *Ramkali Babu*’s specters may not be conspicuous creatures like ‘apparitions that engage in dismal wailing, screeching banshees or hideous ghouls [trapped] in an unrequited search for peace and vengeance... [striking] terror into the haunted’ (Edensor 836), but they are abiding, stealthy creatures, yearning for mortal cognisance, biding their time despite an air of somnolent obeisance and comic appetite.

The Comic, the Tragic, and the Afterlife: Substituting the Fear Principle and Imagined Ecologies of Restitution

While reflecting on the aesthetic and categorical nuances of fear and laughter (or amusement), contemporary philosopher Noël Carroll asserts an intimate relation of affinity between horror and humour. His seminal theorisations on the two mental states begin with a respectful admission of their difference: ‘Being horrified seems as though it should preclude amusement. What causes us to laugh does not appear as though it should also be capable of making us scream. The psychological feelings typically associated with humour include a sense of release and sensations of lightness and expansion; those associated with horror, on the other hand, are feelings of pressure, heaviness, and claustrophobia. Thus, it may appear initially implausible that such broadly opposite affects can attach to the same stimulus’ (1999: 145). As support to his earlier statement, he charts a route by which the two opposing tensions are shown to have a shared source: citing Freud, he reflects that the responses of comic laughter and uncanny feelings are both conscious manifestations of repressed modes of unconscious thinking; they both allude to a need for releasing that which has been safely, and perhaps forcefully, buried. However, Carroll’s more efficient reasoning for the working transformations of horror to humor rests on convincingly emptying the horrifying object of its loathsome or fearsome potentials. Like a monster too slow to run to successfully capture a shrieking human, or the escaped troll in the Hogwarts lavatory who knocks himself out by its own club with a wand stuck up

its nose, a potentially dangerous situation can be instantaneously divested of its threatening intent and comically transformed into a harmless social situation, thereby marking the fictional environment as ‘safe’ (Carroll 157). Tarashankar’s spectral figures are adherents of this principle, as has somewhat been described in the previous section. It is not simply their inhuman capacity for labouring that piques human interest but also their morphology. *Ramkali Babu* writes:

Suddenly an indeterminate blackish blob – the size of a little finger – came plummeting from the void at me at breakneck speed emitting a high-pitched sound; speeding like the Apollo Eleven or Twelve, it was a tiny thing, but its sound was terrible – in a tone even more raucous and nasal like a rubber-flute, it suddenly quacked – *Quick, quick; catch me – catch me Sir, – I’ll turn to dust if I hit the ground.* What rubbish! But what is it? Instinctively my hands cupped around it like catching a cricket ball. Entering into my fist cavity, the thing squeaked – *Thank you Sir. You saved my life...now I can jump.* It sprang from my fist and began to stretch as soon as it landed on the floor. It felt squishy and rubbery to the touch, like a doll...the creature kept stretching till it reached my height, bobbing like a stick puffed up by a balloon pump. It appeared long, squiggly, and thin at first, but slowly expanded in volume into a billowing, rotund, darkened physique with two flashing sets of teeth, saying – *Do you recognize me, Sir? I am one of ‘them’!* (185)

The introduction to ghostly morphology is purposefully made jocular and non-threatening as it is strewn with elements of incongruity. Incongruity is understood as a cognitive process whereby disparate or contrasting ideas or elements are brought together in a way that provokes a feeling of enjoyment to subsequently elicit a humorous response. It is important to consider that the presence of mere inconsistencies or violations in expectations do not always result in incongruous laughter.¹¹ The bodily indeterminacies and structural elasticity of Tarashankar’s specters alternating between a diminutive size and a brobdingnagian corpus defies our commonplace expectations borne out of encountering human corporeality that is neither as functionally flexible nor

¹¹ See John Morreall’s essay ‘Humor as Cognitive Play’ (2009) where he warns about the erroneous ways in which the term has been loosely interpreted by psychologists to include a vast array of meanings like absurdity, ridiculousness, and the ludicrous which compromises its intended meaning reserved for appropriate humorous contexts. For instance, Morreall argues, coming home to find your family murdered can be quite incongruous an event as it violates our normal expectations but it is hardly humorous.

structurally as enormous. The ability to make oneself bigger and bigger till it reaches an intimidating proportion is expected to strike fear and awe in a scaled-down proximal creature as we can witness in numerous ghost stories which use this anatomical unnaturalness to exploit the fear principle: magnitude is used as a method to underground maleficence. For *Ramkali Babu*, this is not a possibility. The spectre's weak physical integrity – inclined to disintegrate into thin air with a literal 'pop' or getting blown to smithereens at a sudden impact with the ground – inspires no reverence in the narrator. He gets incensed at the spectre's antics, exclaiming '*You fancy yourself a ghost? I'm standing right next to you and don't feel scared in the slightest*' (1970: 186). The genuine fear of gigantism is effectively and humorously displaced by the property of superficial inflation which can be pinpricked like a balloon animal and requires absolutely no physical strength to be overcome. To quote Carroll: 'the emotion in question is fear, which disappears when the comic frame causes the burden of moral concern for the life and limb of comic characters to evaporate' (1999: 158).

But comic oddities aside, Tarashankar's spectral subjects grow solemnised under the rallying cry of restitution and recognition whose echoes result – as will be seen shortly – in cosmic mayhem. As noted in one of my previous essays¹², the narrator *Ramkali Sharma* is on a mission: he is a recordkeeper of the 'ancients', the origin-stories and typologies of the primordial ghostly being to whom the earth was originally bequeathed. *Ramkali Babu's* authorial position can be conceptually understood as a merger of tragic and comic incongruities. Like the tragic hero, he strives for something great (attempting a religious doctrine unifying the vagaries and vastness of phantoms and spirits, for instance), his ghost-hunting endeavours are often met with an eerie silence of specters who have vanished from their haunts (causing him a lot of personal distress), and he spends copious amounts of time confronting this disappearance with heroic self-esteem and resistance, hunting for a closure that seems to elude him, making him more agonised in the pursuit of a higher 'truth'. But the road to such noble pursuits is less than heroic. Like the unscrupulous comic hero who tries to make the best of a situation by being flexible in his thoughts and actions instead of rigidly adhering to respectable norms, *Ramkali Babu* grasps that ghost-hunting and/or chronicling demands an adventurous and not a calculative disposition. He thus has to graciously accommodate random spectral intrusions, occasionally

¹² See 'Specters of Partition: A Case for Tarashankar' in *Relocating Bengal Partition Milieu: Survival, Resilience and Belongings*, Centre for Language, Translation & Cultural Studies, Netaji Subhas Open University, 2022, pp. 137-151.

entertain urgent summons into the ghost realm of *Bhut Bhubanpur*¹³ to get live updates, his train journeys are ruptured, he is unceremoniously pushed and prodded and stretched and shrunk, gallivanting with ghostly deputies at a moment's notice to dutifully perform his role as a recordkeeper of the immortals. But let us return to Tarashankar's specters which are our primary constituency. In dealing with Tarashankar's prototype and narrative mechanism of the regional novel, which scholar Sourit Bhattacharya terms as 'peripheral realism', he conceptualises the historical 'region' as situated at the 'porous border of the colonial-capitalist urban and the agricultural-tribal rural' which appeared as a predominant staple in contemporary anti-colonial literary writings (2021:5). This resulted in a worldview which had to objectively present and navigate the conflicts arising from an animistic consciousness involving the 'veneration of nature, plants, nonhuman animals, lands, and natural resources' and more evolved worldviews which considered these relations as 'historically and culturally "backward", as an obstacle to economic progress' (2021: 7). While Tarashankar's textual specters do not occupy a necessarily 'tribal' status, they are unmistakably marginal and marginalised in being afforded a 'lebensraum' or living space in the rising tide of a nation's industrial prowess and concomitant hazards of cognitive and literal displacement. Non-belief is the shortest route to cultural exorcism, which is possibly why Tarashankar's specters (barring very few) are always very conscious of their effervescence, teetering between faith and impiety, which prevents them from fully developing a menacing aura.

Since the ghostly realm or the netherworld is seen as a geographical and mimetic extension of the mortal realm, the resonances of disbelief are naturally causing the casteist, gendered, spiritual, and speciesist hierarchies of cosmic order to develop cracks as well. Deities and demigods venerated by the scheduled classes are increasingly growing impatient of their presumed inferiority and relentless ostracising, thus instigating newborn animal ghosts to seek posthumous revenge against the higher, more secured Brahminical gods for allowing earthly injustices of religious sacrifice offered in the name of veneration. It is a celebratory prospect of afterlife for the nonhuman, where there is finally some retributive potential in death amidst the rumblings of an anti-speciesist war cry. Following a recently proposed bill in the heavenly parliament which can be summarised as a reactionary 'equal outcome', or 'tit for tat' bill, humans are harnessed to ploughs, smacked on their backs by the vengeful spirits of oxen, and forced to do their share of heavy lifting in the heavens in an ironic role reversal of

¹³ *Ibid.*

the Ramprasadi lyrics-turned-idiom ‘*Morlem bhuter begaar khete*’ (translating to ‘Penniless I die as a ghost in forced labor.’) as bullocks merrily smoke hookahs singing praises of a blissful ghostly rebirth or ‘*bhutjonmo*’. By the same logic, humans are also snatching their liberty to be as bestial in their mannerisms towards the nonhuman citing previous animal indiscretions: the narrator witnesses the ghost of a thief walking on all fours and pouncing on a dog, gripping one of its legs viciously in his teeth, as a revenge for being mauled the same way when both were alive. The numerous instances of co(s)mic incongruity have to be understood as part of a larger intellectual-cognitive displacement where specters – indeed any system of animistic belief – is growing less and less culturally potent to arouse social or solitary emotions of reverence in the age of the raging anthropocene: a shift deemed tragic by the narrator and writer both. ‘The price paid for progress was the destruction of past ways of living and being in the world. There was no liberation without active destruction. And a destruction of the past brought forgetting,’ (Huyssen 2). In simplest terms, this is what *Ramkali Babu* – despite his jocular narration (and frequent frustrations) – tragically transforms into: a lonesome memory file of spectral afterlives wandering the deserts of cultural amnesia.

Memory, despite its ascriptions of notorious unreliability and false promises of authenticity (Huyssen 6), is sometimes the only residual defense against annihilation when afforded no other means of closure. Recounting the tale of one *Akkhoy Bot*, or The Indestructible Banyan in his ancestral village in Amadpur, Birbhum, the narrator reveals that what besets the spirit of the dying ancient tree is the apprehension that soon, with the erasure of the fantastic, there will be a concomitant erasure or emptying of local (and some might say vulnerable) ecologies of land and water and vegetation which are critically enmeshed into a region’s cognitive-animistic frameworks held together by myths, legends, and myriad forms of oral storytelling.

The geological age of the anthropocene will be built upon drained ecologies of marshes and wetlands, retreating borders of jungle estates, and tracts of land reassessed in the scales of economic valuation and not its intangible sacredness. The majestic banyan – read as a sedimentation of historical time, accumulating the passage of consecutive characters, stories, and changing social milieus beneath its canopy – is thus a metaphor of an *imagined ecology of restitution*: a safe material congregation for scheduled or ancillary religious deities and a whole host of supernatural beings.

Located at the intersections of ecology and the uncanny, environment and affect, the tree's demise is symbolic of a crumbling of old world-views in a new world of secular imagination, eagerly gathering momentum for commercial transformations. Quite fittingly, its death coincides with the onslaught of industrialisation, as its uprooted trunk is chopped into pieces by coolies to clear the railway track and sold off into the local saw mill, as day laborers and farmers throng the emptied space speculating the future amputations of a consecrated land to make way for arable tracts.

Just as in the previous section, *Ginnima's* ghost (the landlady) was rehabilitated by the architectural spirit of the house which was blown up and died an unnatural death to become a ghost of its previous self, imagined ecologies of restitution are commodious but compromised spectral refuges. Like local municipalities hanging disclaimers of warning in front of 'dangerous houses' (*bipajjanak bari*) which poses a safety risk to its canny and uncanny occupants, its restitutive/spacious utility pales in comparison to the perceived threat of its 'condemned' status – the differential outcomes between demolition and renovation being mediated by the drudgery of long-drawn, civic battles following rounds and rounds of technical evaluation. This perpetual anxiety central to the idea of refuge or restitution brings us back – in a roundabout way – to the ghostly conundrum of homelessness. Merging comic incongruity with material conditions of extracted labour, forced exile, and the existential predicament of estrangement, Tarashankar's specters thus release a laughter which is at most a nervous giggle of sorts, never fully maturing into a full-throated laughter that makes our bodies convulse in pleasurable contractions, our ribs ache, or our eyes fill up in happy tears. They are a weak admission of embarrassment of modernity's one of many anachronisms.

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The Folklore and Cultural Memory of Bon Bibi and the Sundarbans: An Exploration of Ethnopoetics and Mythopoeic Fantasy in Amitav Ghosh's *Jungle Nama*

Nahreen Saleha Shahadat

Abstract

The study aims to identify Amitav Ghosh's text, Jungle Nama (2021), as a cultural artifact that preserves the folklore and cultural memory of Bon Bibi and the Sundarbans. The story of Bon Bibi, which has its roots in oral traditions, has been overlooked as a local folktale despite embodying moral responsibility interfaith harmony, and ecological appreciation. However, Ghosh, through his narrative, and Toor, through his illustrations, were able to revitalise the legend. Using a qualitative research design, the study combines multimodal and textual analysis. The study looks at how Ghosh uses poetic lineation, vernacular retention, and transcreative techniques to preserve the structural and performative aspects of oral tradition, drawing on Dennis Tedlock's ethnopoetics theory. At the same time, the way that archetypes, moral ethos, and ecological reverence are recreated for modern audiences is examined using Joseph Campbell's theory of mythopoeic fantasy. Salman Toor's illustrations, with their simple and iconic style, adapt conventional visual representations while preserving cultural integrity, thereby addressing the multimodal dimension. The results demonstrate that Jungle Nama preserves the structural and thematic essence of the Bon Bibi legend. While mythopoeic fantasy reimagines archetypes, links the past and present, and stresses ecological ethics and interfaith cooperation, ethnopoetic tactics protect its rhythm, language, and cultural authenticity. Overall, the book is not merely a retelling but rather a transformative act of cultural preservation that affirms folklore's significance as a living manual for ethical imagination in the modern world and repositions it within global literary discourse.

Keywords: Folklore, Sundarbans, Bon Bibi, Ethnopoetics, Mythopoeic fantasy

Introduction

Folklore, myth, and oral traditions constitute an indispensable archive of cultural memory through which communities negotiate identity, morality, and their relationship with nature. The story of Bon Bibi (which translates to “Lady of the Forest”), the Sundarbans’ guardian spirit, is a prime example of the dynamic role that myth plays in influencing social life and environmental ethics in the Bengal Delta. The story goes that Bon Bibi was sent from Medina to defend people against Dokhin Rai, the demon-king, who frequently preyed on forest inhabitants by posing as a tiger. Her intervention on behalf of Dukhey, a poor boy who was left in the forest as a sacrifice to Dokhin Rai, is the subject of the most memorable incident. She rescues him by restoring the moral order of self-control, humility, and reverence for the natural world. In contrast to sectarian religious figures, Bon Bibi is regarded with reverence by both Hindu and Muslim populations. She represents harmony between faiths and an ecological code that regulates the precarious coexistence of people and the natural world.

Through poetic cadences that recite oral storytelling and mythological tropes, reinforcing the moral underpinnings of the story, Amitav Ghosh’s verse-based *Jungle Nama* (2021) reimagines this folktale. This reimagination acts as a purposeful ethnopoetic and mythopoeic endeavour, rather than mere storytelling. On one hand, it maintains oral rhythms, vernacular textures, and cultural memory that are ingrained in the Bon Bibi legend; on the other hand, it places the story in a literary context where the supernatural is ontologically real rather than metaphorical, imposing moral and ecological demands on its characters.

By analysing *Jungle Nama* through the dual frameworks of ethnopoetics and mythopoeic fantasy, this study argues that Ghosh revitalises Bengal’s folklore as both a cultural memory and an ecological narrative. Ethnopoetics illuminates how the texts sustain the aesthetics and rhythms of oral storytelling, while mythopoeic fantasy reveals how Ghosh re-enchants myth to address contemporary concerns of inclusivity, morality, and the need for environmental reverence. In doing so, *Jungle Nama* demonstrates that myths such as Bon Bibi’s are not static relics but living traditions, capable of guiding ethical imagination and re-sacralising human relations with the natural world in the 21st century. This paper, therefore, argues that *Jungle Nama*, through the structural and thematic construction of the Sundarbans, performs a vital cultural work: it

preserves a threatened folklore tradition by retaining its literary and thematic forms.

This paper explores how contemporary literature can both preserve threatened traditions and reposition them within broader cultural discourse through the narrative approach of ethnopoetics and the thematic discourse of mythopoeic fantasy. Instead of being regarded as a story with enduring cultural and ecological relevance, the folklore of the Sundarbans, especially the story of Bon Bibi, has frequently been overlooked and pushed to the periphery of literary and cultural consciousness, as well as been dismissed as a regional folktale with little to no broader significance. Since the Sundarbans lies in both Bangladesh and India (as seen in the figures below), the oral traditions are multifaceted, diverse, and evoke the sentiments of both Bangladeshi and Indian people alike, meaning that its cultural significance alludes to a great number of people. Thus, Amitav Ghosh's retelling of this legend in *Jungle Nama* not only preserves its authenticity through mythological archetypes and ethnopoetic rhythms, but it also solidifies and immortalises its moral, cultural, and ecological values. Furthermore, the study demonstrates the significance of both ethnopoetics and mythopoeic fantasy, i.e. how they not only act as tools of cultural preservation but also as frameworks to understand complex literary works that are saturated with heritage and culture.



Fig. 1. The Geographical Location of the Sundarbans (Source: Biswas 3)



Fig. 2. Topography of the Sundarbans (Source: Sundarban Eco Tourism Blog)

The significance of this study is threefold. First, it emphasises how *Jungle Nama* maintains cultural authenticity by retaining the oral textures, vernacular imagery, and moral ethos of the legend of Bon Bibi, guaranteeing that Bengal's cultural memory is alive and accessible in modern writing. Second, it demonstrates how the text renders the legend of Bon Bibi out of the fringes of "folk culture" and

places it into the main discourses of literary and cultural studies, thereby resisting the marginalisation of folklore. By doing this, Ghosh reclaims folklore as an essential cultural text instead of a secondary or inferior tradition. Third, by reminding readers that folklore is a living, dynamic narrative that addresses contemporary concerns of cross-faith harmony, ecological ethics, and communal identity, the study demonstrates how *Jungle Nama* calls for increased cultural awareness and attention.

Overall, this study shows how *Jungle Nama* increases the interpretive potential of folklore while also preserving cultural memory by emphasising ethnopoetics and mythopoeic imagination as complementary approaches. By doing this, it emphasises how crucial it is to re-centre fading traditions as essential to modern ecological theory and cultural identity.

Multimodality and Cultural Revitalisation in *Jungle Nama*

More than just a contemporary book, Amitav Ghosh's *Jungle Nama* (2021) is a significant cultural preservation effort that formally recognises the oral tradition of Bon Bibi as an essential cultural relic that reflects the ecological knowledge and cultural memory of the Sundarbans. Ghosh maintains the story's structural coherence and moral relevance for a global audience dealing with the climate issue by reimagining the Bon Bibi story through the lenses of both ethnopoetics and mythopoeic imagination, and the approach of hermeneutic phenomenology. Although neither of these frameworks has been formally employed in prior studies, the literary and ethical depth of this work is confirmed by existing scholarship. Thus, a focused examination of the text's contribution to the revitalisation of intangible cultural heritage is still a crucial academic endeavour.

Vescovi (2024) critically emphasised the text's structural commitment, which is the foundation for its effectiveness in maintaining the original folklore. In order to recreate the genuine cadence and rhythm of Bengali folk songs, Vescovi points out that Ghosh purposefully “adopted an English adaptation of the *dwipodi poyar*” (Vescovi 109), knowingly eschewing typical English meters. This method is a key component of ethnopoetics, in which the text's artistic worth is directly derived from the manner of oral performance of its source. This essay argues that Ghosh employs a transcreative technique that incorporates the performative elements of the oral Bon Bibi tradition into the modern written form while preserving the vernacular form. This structural decision, which is essential to the paper's argument, shows how the text actively contributes to the

preservation of intangible cultural heritage, i.e. the folklore's own rhythm, ensuring its continued existence and significance.

In addition, *Jungle Nama* serves as a work of mythopoeic fantasy, adapting the moral core of the old tale for a modern setting. According to Sharma (2023), in the isolated settlements of the Sundarbans, the legend, which includes the kind divinity Bon Bibi, her brother Shah Jangoli, and the avaricious monster Dokkhin Rai, has long functioned as “transhistorical and cultural embodiments of cultural knowledge” (Sharma 150). The book has continuously been recognised by scholars as an eco-spiritual and eco-aesthetical interpretation of the narrative. For example, Divyasri & Chakrabarti (2023) affirm that Bon Bibi's divine function creates “a spiritual and moral imperative for the protection and conservation of the environment” (Divyasri & Chakrabarti 47) whereas Bawa & Thakur (2023) concentrate on the eco-aesthetical qualities, stating that the text “unveils a profound and intricate relationship between nature, humanity, and the ecological crisis” (Bawa & Thakur 4113). Ruma Banerjee (2024) and M & Manju (2024) adapt this insight to the contemporary world by interpreting the fable as a potent metaphor for the climate problem, highlighting the necessity of setting limits and striking a balance against unbridled human greed. According to Banerjee (2024), Ghosh implies that “we should not lose our empathy and respect for our environment” (Banarjee 22) and that the mythopoeic fantasy urges readers to follow certain bounds in regard to the land and raises the ethical wisdom of the local folklore into a universal moral norm. It does more than just recount a story. Similarly, M & Manju (2024) claims that “with its style and narration, the *Jungle Nama* stands unique in the array of eco-literature collections” (M & Manju 46).

Furthermore, other aspects of the essential ecological, ethical, and spiritual aspects of *Jungle Nama* can also be found. According to Divyasri & Chakrabarti (2023), who approach the text from an eco-spiritual perspective, the Bon Bibi legend serves to revive eco-spiritual myth by producing values that inspire the indigenous locals, irrespective of their religious background, to be environmentally conscious and deeply respectful. Similarly, Islam in his paper emphasises on the eco aesthetic qualities, i.e. “*Jungle Nama* has strong allegorical and metaphorical implications towards socio-political ecology under the culture of anthropocentrism” (Islam 134).

Nuzhat Tabassum's (2024) eco-feminist interpretation, which examines how gender roles intersect with nature in Ghosh's works emphasises the crucial

position of the heavenly feminine guardian in the conservation story. The author states that “the mythic Bon Bibi in *Jungle Nama*, his female characters ground survival strategies in place-based practical knowledge that pushes against patriarchal and exploitative models where nature is treated as an object or tool, rather than agency” (Tabassum 63). The larger ecocritical framework developed by Mahalik & Samal (2024), whose analysis of the Sundarbans Trilogy emphasises Ghosh’s enduring and deep concerns over ecological imbalance and the ensuing existential crises facing the region. All of these interpretations support the myth’s dual role as a potent vehicle for contemporary ecological criticism and a moral compass.

Notably, the text’s multimodal nature supports this combination of the moral message’s revitalisation and its intact structure. According to Vescovi (2024), the piece is a “multimodal nama” (Vescovi 111), recognising the way in which the accompanying images by Salman Toor convert folk imagery into the vernacular of “global art.” The cultural integrity of the legend is preserved while its narrative accessibility is enhanced through this graphic adaptation. This research argues that *Jungle Nama* serves as a dynamic vessel that preserves the Sundarbans’ cultural memory by adapting the myth’s oral (*dwipodi poyar*) and visual (iconography) essences. Similarly, Samkaria also put emphasis on the “multimodal iterations and performativity” (Samkaria 203) of the text.

Since the paper incorporates the approach of hermeneutic phenomenology to solidify the text’s status as a cultural archive, it is essential to document the actual lived experiences of the inhabitants’ cultural beliefs and traditions. The article by Zahid (2024) briefly summarises the significance of Bon Bibi and the arch of Dukhey, as well as attaches an illustration of Bon Bibi and Dokkhin Ray, reflecting the imaginative silhouette of the figures. The article posted by Greater Sundarbans (2024), on the other hand, offers a more in-depth account of the traditions. The narrative of Bon Bibi is cited as “an intangible heritage”. The account is further evidenced by various shrines created in reverence to Bon Bibi. These attachments are important to keep track of because the reflection of the same sentiments in *Jungle Nama* would prove the text to be a cultural archive, which is examined in the study through the approach of hermeneutic phenomenology.

The paper’s analysis of *Jungle Nama* through ethnopoetics and mythopoeic imagination ultimately makes the case that the book is more than just a work of literature; it is a cultural artifact. It serves as a living textbook that connects myth

and modernity, local particularity and global discourse, and oral tradition and modern literature. In addition to publishing a narrative, Ghosh engages in a significant act of literary activism by showing how folklore may support cultural preservation and ethical imagination in the face of 21st-century issues.

Ethnopoetics

Ethnopoetics intersects two complementary disciplines: literature and anthropology. It seeks to utilise literature as a medium to retain and reflect culture. Dennis Tedlock in his paper “Towards an Oral Poetics” delineated the manner in which authors often subvert traditional approaches to translation and inscriptions. This subversive approach is termed as ethnopoetics.

The main features of this narrative technique are threefold. The first and foremost element is that ethnopoetics challenges standard anthropological transcription. Standard anthropological transcription has frequently reduced oral narratives to flat prose, depriving them of rhythm, intonation, and performance qualities that are essential to their cultural and aesthetic worth. Tedlock claimed that “we shall never develop an effective oral poetics if we begin with structural analysis of conventional written texts” (Tedlock 507). Ethnopoetics provides a substantial remedy for these shortcomings. Secondly, ethnopoetics acknowledges that oral storytelling is a dynamic art form that is influenced by audience engagement, tone changes, and pauses. It is not only a means of conveying information; these elements are lost when texts are presented in tight writing. Dennis Tedlock and others support poetic lineation as a solution to this erasure. This approach breaks the story into lines that represent pitch, rhythm, and pauses, maintaining the performative quality of the oral tradition and bringing the transcription closer to the way the story is actually heard. This technique brings oral texts back to life on paper while recognising the musicality of language. Finally, the job of the translator and editor is equally crucial; in order to guarantee authenticity and adherence to tradition, they must cooperate with native speakers and cultural informants. Tedlock notes that “the narrators... do not sing stories but *speak* them” (Tedlock 507). As a co-performer, the translator's job is to recreate the storyteller's voice instead of providing an objective record. By using the traditional *dwipodi poyar* form in works like *Jungle Nama*, Ghosh draws on these ethnopoetic practices, which together highlight that oral narratives are living cultural artifacts rather than raw data. This ensures that the written text maintains the cadence, resonance, and imaginative power of the oral tale.

The identification of these three elements of ethnopoetics will guide the paper to identify the manner in which Amitav Ghosh was able to retain the initial structure, rhythm, and tangible essence of the legend of Bon Bibi. This theoretical concept acts as a tool to analyse the structural aspects of *Jungle Nama*.

Mythopoeic Fantasy

Mythopoeic fantasy, according to Joseph Campbell, is the creative reworking of mythic archetypes and structures into new stories that continue to satisfy humanity's enduring desire for meaning. He views myth as a dynamic framework that helps people and civilisations comprehend universal phenomena like creation, transformation, and transcendence rather than as archaic folklore. In this way, mythopoeic fantasy uses myth's symbolic power to tell tales that speak to our shared memories while tackling today's issues.

Marek Oziewicz's account of Joseph Campbell's 'New Fantasy' offers a straightforward and simplified description of mythopoeic fantasy. In *Joseph Campbell's "New Mythology" and the Rise of Mythopoeic Fantasy*, Oziewicz defines several elements of mythopoeic fantasy. First and foremost, it deals with mythic reimagination, i.e. it is defined to be "a narrative constructed from artistically re-imagined mythic materials and archetypes aimed to create an imaginative experience of a universe in which metaphysical concepts are objective realities" (Oziewicz 123). Notably, this includes not only the imagination of narrative plots or structures but also archetypes, motifs, morals, ethos, and so on. Besides reimagination, there is a prominent aspect of synthesis. The core of mythopoeic fantasy, according to Joseph Campbell, is the development of narratives that respect and incorporate characters of all genders, ethnicities, and religions. According to these narratives, cooperation rather than separatism, mutual respect rather than merely tolerance, and partnership rather than dominance are the only ways to truly attain peace and happiness in a varied, multireligious, and multigendered society. In this sense, mythopoeic fantasies offer a uniting framework for societal harmony by actively imagining a future that combines the knowledge of the past with the desires of the present, in addition to criticising divisive systems. Oziewicz notes "mythopoeic fantasies which explore and explicitly reflect this desire for the integration of the past and the future" (Oziewicz 125).

Thus, the main elements of mythopoeic fantasy are mythic reimagination, synthesis of religious, gender, nature, cultures, and the past with the present, and

ecological reverence. The depiction or reflection of these elements in preserved literature thus helps to retain the authenticity and integrity of cultural memory and heritage. These elements will be identified in order to delineate Amitav Ghosh's act of preserving the ethos of the Sundarbans and the reverence towards Bon Bibi.

The paper adopts a dual lens through which it analyses the depiction and preservation of an intangible oral tradition. There is very little written documentation that reflects the oral legend of Bon Bibi, and even fewer in English. Therefore, the paper considers *Jungle Nama* to be a modern artifact that depicts this narrative. Since cultural preservation and the authentic reflection of folklore are complex tasks, the paper not only examines the structural elements through Dennis Tedlock's ethopoetics, but also the thematic aspects through the lens of Joseph Campbell's mythopoeic fantasy.

The paper first identifies the structural elements utilised by Amitav Ghosh in the depiction of the tale. The identification takes a two-fold approach, i.e. the deduction of poetic lineation and unorthodox anthropological transcriptions. Second, in the thematic analysis, elements of mythic reimagining, synthesis, and reverence towards ecology are deduced. The following is the theoretical framework utilised in the analysis of *Jungle Nama*.

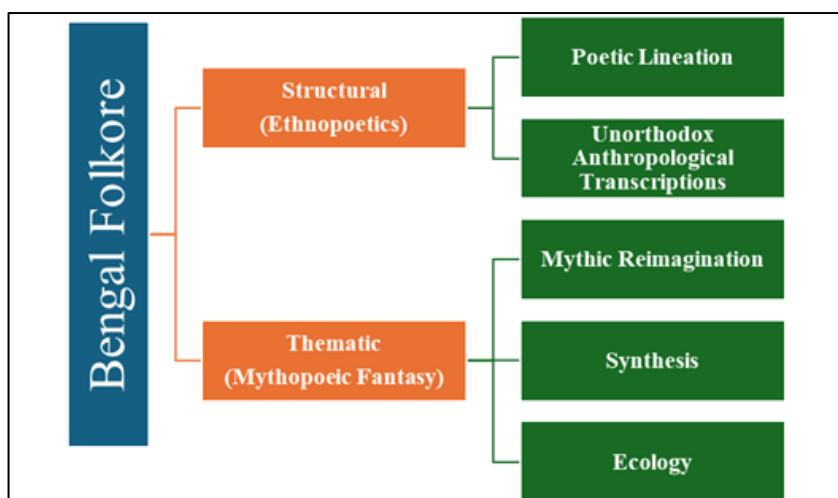


Fig. 3. Conceptualisation of how Bengal folklore is preserved structurally and thematically

Ethnopoetic Narrativisation of the Sundarbans through Poetic Lineation and Unorthodox Anthropological Transcriptions

Poetic lineation is one of the key elements of ethnopoetic documentation. In order to analyse the poetic lineation of *Jungle Nama*, we must familiarise ourselves with the *dwipodi poyar*. The *dwipodi poyar* (দ্বিপদী পয়ার) in Bengali, which translates to ‘two-footed metre’, is one of the oldest and most prominent verse forms in Bengali literature; it is widely used in folk epics such as the *Mangal-Kavyas* and the original *Bon Bibi Johuranama*. Traditionally, this rhythmic technique consists of fourteen syllables per line, divided into two balanced hemistiches of eight and six syllables. The purpose of this structure is to create and replicate a natural pause that lends the verse its distinctive chant-like rhythm. It was especially well-suited for oral recitation and communal performance because of its couplet structure, rhythmic symmetry, and mnemonic clarity, which enabled storytellers and listeners to participate in an almost musical experience. Because English focuses on stress-based prosody rather than syllable counts, Ghosh was unable to accurately duplicate the syllabic structure of *poyar* in his writing. Rather, he uses steady cadence rhyming couplets to portray the form, creating a rhythm that mimics the original's incantatory nature while yet being understandable to readers who are not familiar with Bengali measurements. Most of his verses include twenty-four syllables in two lines, containing twelve syllables each. For example:

“The sprouting of avarice begins in the spring,
when bees are busy and flowers are blossoming” (Ghosh 7);
“With these words the deva vanished into the night, while Dhona slept
on,
till the first crack of daylight” (Ghosh 40).

By using this format, Ghosh does more than just recount the story; he also preserves the cultural authenticity of Bengali folk poetry while emphasising its universality by transferring its oral vitality into English. By doing this, *Jungle Nama* ensures that the poetic-musical aura of the Sundarbans' narrative history is retained even in translation, bridging the gap between local oral tradition and a worldwide public.

Although Ghosh was unable to replicate the verse style in his English translation, he nonetheless shed light on the traditional verse style by

incorporating the structure of the *dwipodi poyar* in his narrative. In part III of the text, Ghosh writes:

Be sure to cast your call in dwipodi-poyar,
it'll give your voice wings, it's the meter of wonder;
its cadence will strengthen your words; they'll gain in power;
it'll work its magic by tying your thoughts together;
into couplets of twenty-four syllables,
that sometimes rhyme, and sometimes use half- rhymed vocables.
Compose them well, and your lines will reach Bon Bibi,
if there's enough faith in your heart, she'll come, you'll see.
(Ghosh 23-24)

In addition to preserving the oral-musical essence of Bengali folk poetry, Ghosh informs readers worldwide about a verse style that is essential to the Sundarbans' narrative culture by evoking the cadence and symmetry of the original form. Because of this alteration, *Jungle Nama* is no longer merely a translation but rather a work of cultural transmission and preservation, as well as an act of transcreation guaranteeing that the *poyar* rhythms continue to reverberate beyond their original linguistic borders.

The second most significant element of ethnopoetics is the unorthodox approach to anthropological transcriptions. While traditional transcriptions generally opt to conduct straightforward translations, in ethnopoetics, the author subverts denotative reflection and gravitates to more connotative transcreations. In *Jungle Nama* this unorthodox approach is sustained through the retention of Bengali words and the incorporation of art that reverses the integrity of Bon Bibi while also maintaining narrative alignment.

Jungle Nama's use of Bengali terms is an important ethnopoetic strategy since it maintains the linguistic and cultural texture of the oral tradition that the story is based on. Amitav Ghosh purposefully preserves certain terminology and keeps culturally distinctive names intact so they can serve as untranslated cultural signifiers rather than flattening the story into a completely Anglicised rendition. There are several examples throughout the text where Ghosh retained the Bengali version, despite being objectively translatable, in order to retain connotative depth as well as aid in the formulation of the trans-created *dwipodi poyar*. Examples of such terminology include, but not limited to: *shikar* (meaning prey), *bhai* (meaning brother), "river-ghat" (meaning river bank), "*chacha*"

(meaning paternal uncle), “*kismet*” (meaning fate), “*durbar*” (meaning court), *pishachi* (referring to an evil spirit), lakhs (numerical term; 1 lakh refers to a 100,000), “baksheesh” (meaning tip), and so forth. Many of these words, although translatable, do not hold the same meaning when translated into English. The homogenising tendency of traditional translation, which frequently domesticates the “foreign” for the comfort of the intended audience, is resisted by this decision. The irreducibility of cultural meaning is shown by the retention of ethnopoeitic phrases; these words contain layers of myth, belief, and actual practice that are impossible to simply translate into English without losing their meaning. However, rather than passively absorbing a universalised folktale, their inclusion in the text compels readers to interact with the peculiarity and particular of the oral culture of the Sundarbans. By grounding the story in its Bengali context, it authenticates the story and encourages readers to be curious about different cultures by allowing them to experience the language and cultural “other” on its own terms. This ensures that the story maintains its roots even as it circulates in a global literary environment, making the use of Bengali language an act of resistance and cultural preservation.

One aspect of linguistic retention that should be specifically acknowledged is the title of the book itself, i.e. *Jungle Nama*. The term *Nama* is a particularly telling choice. The word *nama* in Bengali, and more generally in Persian and Urdu traditions, refers to a story or chronicle, in other words, a poetry or prose description of events, frequently heroic or sacred, like *Shahnama* (Book of Kings) or *Baburnama* (Memoirs of Babur). Ghosh takes inspiration from the *Bon Bibi Johuranama*, the primary text in the Sundarbans oral tradition that tells the story of Bon Bibi. Ghosh indicates a clear connection to the indigenous performance tradition and opposes deleting its cultural and linguistic heritage by keeping *nama* in the English title rather than replacing it with a word like “tale” or “story.” The title itself serves as an untranslated signifier, placing the work inside the context of South Asian oral-literary legacy, making this an ethnopoeitic gesture. Below is the comparison between the original *Bon Bibi Johuranama* and Amitav Ghosh’s *Jungle Nama*:

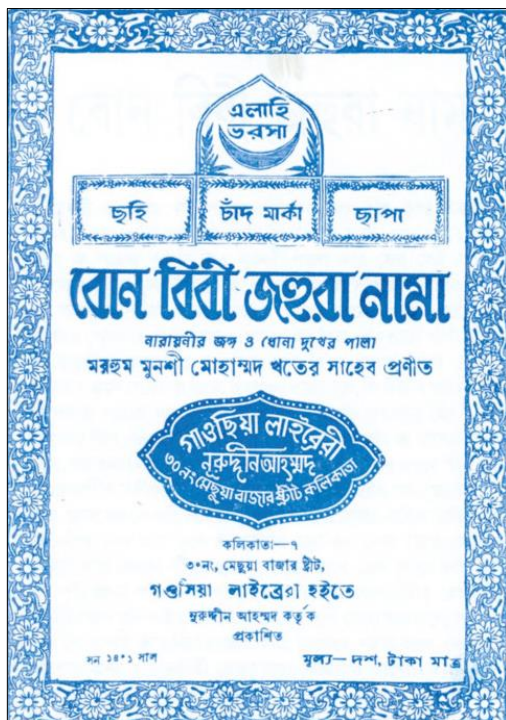


Fig. 4. Cover of Mohammad Khater's *Bonbibi Johuranama* (Photo: Sufia M. Uddin, via the dailystar.net)

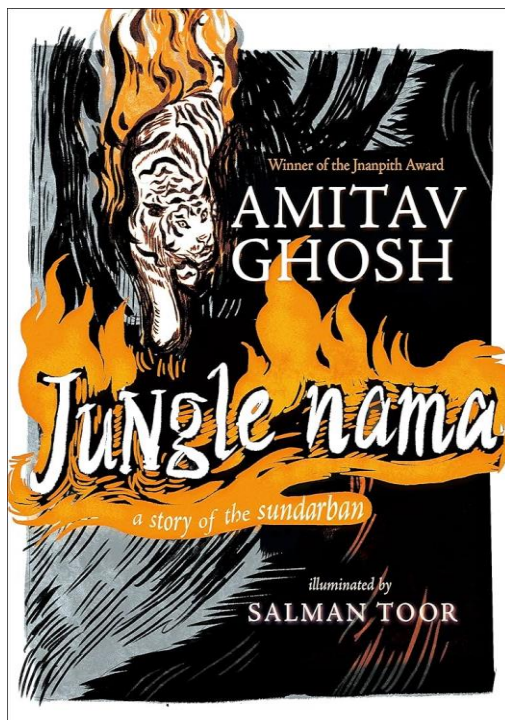


Fig. 5. Amitav Ghosh's *Jungle Nama*

An aspect of unorthodox anthropological transcripts in the incorporation of various illustrations. Instead of mimicking traditional art forms or likenesses, the illustrator, Salman Toor, used his artistic freedom, while maintaining the original essence.

Salman Toor's pictures in *Jungle Nama* are notable for their simple, nearly abstract style, which contrasts dramatically with the more ornate, vibrant representations found in traditional Bon Bibi imagery. Bon Bibi and her companions are typically shown in colourful folk-art forms in Sundarbans local performances and ceremonial contexts, with elaborate costumes, intricate backgrounds, and highly expressive faces intended to communicate divinity, strength, and narrative clarity. These traditional images serve as instructional instruments for communities to acknowledge, honor, and absorb the moral order that Bon Bibi represents. They are not only ornamental; they are performative. Below are a few examples of how Bon Bibi, Dokkhin Rai, Dukhey, and other characters are traditionally perceived:



Fig. 6. Representational image of Bonbibi, the goddess of the Sundarbans forest (Image source: *Dhaka Tribune*, Zahraa Bint Zahid)



Fig. 7. Bonbibi – The Guardian of Sundarbans (Photo: Artwork by Sayantan Bose)

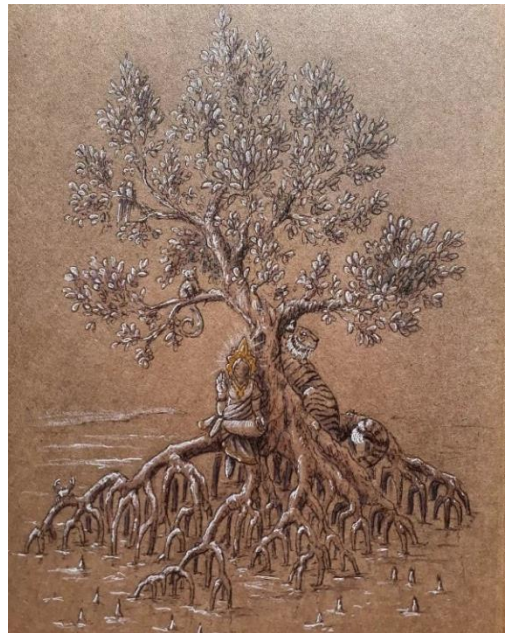


Fig. 8. Bonbibi -Lady of the forest and Protectress of the Sundarbans (Photo: Becky Camfield)

Compared to the artworks, the sculptural designs are significantly more vibrant, incorporating faces, shapes, bodies, and so forth. Below are a few examples of such artistic representations (see **Figs. 9-12**).



Fig. 9. Bonbibi Shrine near the Sundarbans. Source: <https://greatersundarbans.org/blog/bonbibi>



Fig. 10. Images of Dokkhin Rai (Tiger God), Dukhe (in blue shirt), and Bonbibi (Forest Goddess), [Photo: Louis Werner]



Fig. 11. The Idol of Bon Bibi along with Dokkhin Rai and Dukhi in a shrine, (Credit: Arindam Maity and Suddhasil Halder)



Fig. 12. Bonbibi in Sundarban, West Bengal, India (Photo: Pinakpani, via Wikimedia Commons)

Jungle Nama's illustrations, on the other hand, take on a simplified, nearly symbolic style. The drawings are purposefully simple, monochrome, and sketch-like, depending more on motions, outlines, and shapes than on intricate figuration. Most remarkably, they refrain from showing faces, which appeals to two conflicting emotions. First, it exhibits a reverent aesthetic: by avoiding committing the mythic or heavenly figures to a single visual identity, their sacred ambiguity is maintained, allowing the reader or listener to imagine them. Second, the lack of facial representation is reminiscent of an Islamic aniconic tendency, which forbids the portrayal of sentient people, particularly holy characters like saints or prophets, in order to avoid idolatry or contempt. This moderation shows consideration for the people for which Bon Bibi is still a live spiritual figure and respects the syncretic aspect of the Bon Bibi myth, which lies

at the nexus of Islamic and Hindu traditions. Below are some examples of such illustrations:



Fig. 13. Depiction of the demonic Dokkhin Rai against Dukhey by Salman Toor, page 50 – 51



Fig. 14. Depiction of Dukhey's widowed mother by Salman Toor, page 27



Fig. 15. Depiction of Dhona and his crew in the jungle by Salman Toor, page 42-43

The final outcome is a collection of pictures that serve to convey ambiance rather than tell a story through images, changing the role of visuals from explanatory to suggestive. The images in *Jungle Nama* purposefully avoid setting meaning, in contrast to conventional Bon Bibi illustrations, which are frequently openly didactic, giving the audience clear depictions of people, gestures, and even moral signals. Their limited details, lack of face characteristics, and simple brushwork evoke an air of openness that invites readers to fill in the blanks with their own imagination. With this method, the pictures become a collaborative space between the reader and the text, where visual signals allude to sanctity, tension, or mood without prescribing a single interpretation. Instead of fighting with the verse, the visuals become ambient companions that reflect its allegorical resonance and chant-like rhythm. The images emphasise the story's mythological and symbolic qualities by dismissing narrative literalism, highlighting its status as a cultural chronicle that is intended to be read and reinterpreted over time. As a result, the illustrations lead readers into a creative interaction with the story, reflecting the flexibility of oral storytelling traditions, which are interpretive, open-ended, and full of possibilities.

Therefore, Ghosh was able to retain the cultural value of the original folklore in several ways. First, through his transcreation of the *dwipodi poyar*. Second, through his retention of Bengali words. Finally, through the reinterpretation of artistic depictions of the characters.

The Poetic Reimagination and Ecological Reverence of the Sundarbans through Mythopoeic Fantasy

Mythopoeic fantasy, broadly, can be considered to denote three core elements: mythic reimagination, synthesis, and ecocritical consciousness. Each of these elements have been utilised by Amitav Ghosh in his retelling of the legend of the Sundarbans and Bon Bibi.

Ghosh reimagines the narrative of Bon Bibi not as a static folktale but as a living myth, reconstructed through in three ways, i.e. the reimagination of archetypes, the reimagination of traditional ethos, and the reimagination of artistic renditions of the folklore. Traditional characters are transformed into archetypal figures in the narrative that go beyond their original folkloric setting. As the guardian of the Sundarbans, Bon Bibi is transformed into the quintessential protector-mother, representing compassion and fairness. Dokkhin Rai, her counterpart, embodies the archetype of the wild's tempter and ruler, signifying unbridled desire, greed, and the dangers of human intrusion into delicate ecosystems. The human child at the story's core, Dukhey, is recast as the everyman, representing innocence, vulnerability, and the vulnerable situation of individuals who rely on nature to survive. Ghosh universalises the Sundarbans tale through these archetypes, making it a moral allegory about vulnerability, power, and ecological balance that can be understood by people from different cultural backgrounds. Other than archetypes, the traditional ethos is associated with the hubris of exploitation and the violence of economic desperation.

Salman Toor's illustrations carry the reimagining into the visual realm. Traditional folk art representations of Bon Bibi are vivid, colourful, and narratively detailed, and they are frequently intended to instruct and guide devotees. This is especially true of patachitra scrolls and shrine paintings. *Jungle Nama* deviates from this style by showcasing simple, monochrome illustrations that create mood rather than telling a story. Examples include:



Fig. 16. Depiction of Dokkhin Rai by Salman Toor, page 19



Fig. 17. Depiction of Dokkhin Rai and crew members by Salman Toor, page 30-31

Both of the above illustrations, although minimalistic, have a definite mood of eeriness and imply a looming sense of danger, which helps maintain the original tone while also allowing the illustrator, Salman Toor, to utilise his artistic

freedom. In both cases, the dark shades and the emphasis on the tiger's (Dokkhin Rai's) eyes connote hostility and aggression, which align with the original character descriptions of the folklore.

A significant decision that respects Islamic inclinations to refrain from figural portrayal and maintains the sacred ambiguity of these fabled beings is the absence of facial characteristics in the pictures. This artistic constraint is consistent with Ghosh's textual strategy: the art fosters creative engagement rather than didactic fixation, just like his use of rhythmic couplets approximates the cadence of *dwipodi poyar*. Example of shrouding the likenesses of individuals include:



Fig. 18. Dukhey's mother and Dhona, page 63



Fig. 19. Dukhey and his mother, page 67

Along with mythic reimagination, the element of synthesis also plays a significant role in the act of preserving culture. Ghosh synthesises the past with the present, both structurally and thematically. Formally, Ghosh uses the rhythmic structure of *dwipodi poyar*, a rhymed Bengali couplet that has long been a part of the Sundarbans oral storytelling tradition. Although it is impossible to duplicate the verse pattern precisely in English, Ghosh's selection of rhymed couplets closely resembles the original's cadence, giving the written English text an echo of the oral performance tradition. In a similar vein, the story intertwines classic archetypes, as mentioned earlier: the protector, the trickster, and the innocent, with contemporary themes of ecological vulnerability, the

perils of human greed, and the moral obligations of cohabitation. In this sense, historical structures and narratives are kept as living frameworks that still teach readers today rather than as stagnant artifacts. Ghosh's refusal to associate the story to a particular religious identity is an equally important act of synthesising the past with the present. As a reflection of the Sundarbans' pluralistic culture, the Bon Bibi legend itself is a syncretic tradition in which Hindu and Muslim elements live peacefully. By portraying Bon Bibi as a moral force whose authority cuts across denominational lines rather than as a sectarian person, Ghosh maintains this interfaith unity. He evades direct religious associations, and as a result, he is able to bring forth past traditions in an irreligious manner, which welcomes individuals of various faiths, cultures, and religions to appreciate and acknowledge the tale in the 21st century. *Jungle Nama*, thus, respects the syncretic roots of the folklore while universalising it by eliminating confessional bias and emphasising universal moral teachings.

Finally, ecology acts as a significant aspect of mythopoeic fantasy as well. The sensibilities of which, i.e. reverence towards nature, have been reflected in Amitav Ghosh's narrative. According to Campbell, myth serves as a means of reawakening people to the sacred aspects of existence. *Jungle Nama* accomplishes this by portraying the Sundarbans mangrove forest as a sacred, enchanted place rather than a mundane background. The landscape is resacralised by the presence of Bon Bibi, the divine protector, who transforms creeks, islands, and forests into havens where moral and spiritual law govern human behaviour. The revered aura of nature is restored by this legendary frame, which opposes contemporary inclinations to view it as merely a commodity. Furthermore, the story serves as a reminder to readers that humility and an understanding of ecological boundaries are essential for life in the Sundarbans. Dukhey's experience serves as an example of what occurs when people disregard this rule: they put themselves in risk and cause destruction when they enter the forest rashly or disrespectfully. Thus, Ghosh utilises the story to inform contemporary readers that nature is not always available or understanding. Campbell's theory that myths can be used as a guide to responsible living is echoed by the Sundarbans' delicate ecology, which serves as a warning against complacency.

The illustrations included in the text become relevant in this discussion again. Although Salman Toor adopted a minimalistic approach, the entirety of the text is adorned with small and subtle illustrations of elements of nature, such as fire, wind, birds, trees/foliage, and so on. Salman Toor's use of natural

elements as an aesthetic tool further reflects the reverence towards nature. Subtle illustrations include:



Fig. 20. Birds, page 7



Fig. 21. Plants, page 11



Fig. 22. Fire, page 21



Fig. 23. Fire, page 24



Fig. 24. Birds page 26



Fig. 25. Branches, page 37

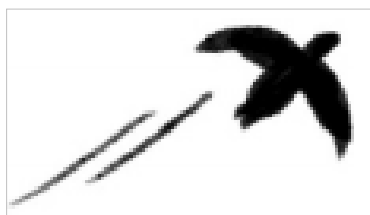


Fig. 26. Bird, page 47



Fig. 27. Waves and wind, page 66

Therefore, the incorporation of the elements of mythopoeic fantasy aided in the retention and preservation of the cultural sensibilities and the integrity of the folklore.

Conclusion

This study has shown that *Jungle Nama* by Amitav Ghosh is a cultural artifact that preserves and revitalises the folklore and cultural memory of Bon Bibi and the Sundarbans, and it is much more than a literary adaptation of a local folktale. Ghosh ensures that the Bon Bibi legend's structural vitality is not lost in translation by utilising Dennis Tedlock's ethnopoetics principles to preserve the oral-musical cadence, vernacular richness, and performative spirit of the story. *Jungle Nama* is a transcreation rather than a simple adaptation because of his conscious decisions, which include the use of rhyming couplets to imitate the *dwipodi poyar*, the preservation of Bengali phrases, and the cooperative pictures by Salman Toor. These techniques make the story accessible to a worldwide audience while preserving its oral tradition-based origins in Bengal.

At the same time, Ghosh's retelling transforms into a thematic reimagination that places folklore inside current cultural and ecological debate when viewed through the prism of Joseph Campbell's mythopoeic fantasy. By reimagining characters like Bon Bibi, Dokkhhin Rai, and Dukhey, the story gains worldwide resonance as a moral allegory of humility, justice, and ecological balance, transcending its regional limits. *Jungle Nama* turns folklore into a living textbook that addresses pressing modern issues like environmental degradation, interfaith harmony, and cultural inclusivity by emphasising ecological reverence, interfaith harmony, and moral responsibility.

The findings of this paper emphasise that folklore should not be dismissed as peripheral or static, but rather recognised as a dynamic, interpretive, and adaptive cultural form. Folklore like that of Bon Bibi continues to embody the moral imagination and ecological wisdom of a community, while simultaneously offering a framework to negotiate present-day challenges. By positioning *Jungle Nama* within both ethnopoetic and mythopoeic frameworks, this paper shows how literature can play a pivotal role in the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, while also ensuring its relevance for modern readers.

Ultimately, *Jungle Nama* affirms that the myths of the Sundarbans are not relics of the past but living traditions that can inspire ethical imagination in the

twenty-first century. It bridges the gap between oral storytelling and contemporary literary culture, between local specificity and global discourse, and between myth and modernity. In doing so, it not only immortalises Bon Bibi's legend but also demonstrates the transformative power of literature in preserving, revitalising, and re-sacralising cultural memory.

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Staging Folklore and Feminism in Deconstructing the R/evolution of Bhadu in the Bengali Play *Bhadrajaa* (2018)

Praggnaparamita Biswas and Anup Shekhar Chakraborty

Abstract

Drawing from the interdisciplinary debates of folk culture, performance theory, feminism and anthropology, the present study intends to read the nearly lost Bengali folk culture of 'Bhadu'. This paper aims to investigate the historical background of Bhadu as a form of lok or folk culture, its visibility within specific geographical regions and among practitioners, any cultural recognition it may have received, the preservation of existing narratives about Bhadu, the ecology of folk drama, and the process of revitalizing its popularity. Chatterjee's theatrical production, Bhadrajaa (2018), effectively prompts audience to contemplate these afore mentioned inquiries. Folk culture serves as a means of national self-expression and imparts knowledge not only about a specific culture, but also about humanity in general. The emergence of folk theatre is associated with the evolving socio-economic and political circumstances. The text sheds light on the emergence of various regional languages across the nation and their endeavour to maintain their identity as unique socio-cultural and linguistic entities. The study examines the religious practises and customs of a specific tribe, which is closely situated to a rural environment. Additionally, it explores how the support of the local and rural populace plays a crucial role in the acknowledgment of folk theatre. The play Bhadrajaa endeavours to narrate a story of a princess named Bhadu who was subsequently adopted and raised by a tribal household, with a focus on religiosity and rituals. During her adolescence, she is subjected to the machinations of royal politics as she is deliberately elevated to the status of a living goddess. The local inhabitants have attributed anthropomorphic qualities to her and consequently venerate her as a rural divinity. Bhadu's resurrection has emboldened her to expose the corrupt nature of royal politics and reject her status as a deity. The evolution of Bhadu represents a significant transformation aimed at safeguarding her feminine identity.

Keywords: Bhadu, Cultural preservation, Deitism, Feminism, Folk drama/culture, Orality, Religiosity, Ritual theatre

Introduction

In the realm of folklore, much like in various other genres and disciplines, it is often observed that a certain bias towards the male perspective has historically prevailed. Similarly, in the realm of cultural studies also, it is often observed that there exists a tendency among individuals to perceive the realm of folklore predominantly through a male lens. This inclination towards a male-centric perspective inadvertently perpetuates sexist notions regarding prevailing gender roles within folklore. Consequently, this limited viewpoint can hinder the breadth and depth of inquiry during the course of conducting fieldwork in the realm of folklore. In the realm of folklore studies, it is evident that there was an initial absence of a feminist perspective when examining the representation of women characters and female deities. This absence, whether intentional or unintentional, resulted in a discipline that was permeated by a gender bias. The incorporation of feminist perspectives in the examination of folklore presents an exciting avenue for the development of folkloric feminist scholarship. By exploring women's lore, this approach offers fresh insights into the field of folklore and highlights the transformative power of the feminist lens. Through this lens, the interpretation of folklore takes on a distinct meaning, challenging the prevailing patriarchal norms and fostering a disruption within the broader cultural landscape. The folkloric feminist method aims to provide a framework through which one can comprehend social dynamics as power dynamics that are influenced by gender. In the realm of culture studies, it is intriguing to observe the intersection between feminism and mainstream folklorists. While feminism often carries a political agenda and seeks to transform the societal standing of women, it is noteworthy that mainstream folklorists typically do not explicitly associate themselves with political activism. However, it is fascinating to note that their methodological and theoretical underpinnings are sufficiently compatible to be united. The collaborative endeavours of individuals involved in this endeavour serve to authenticate and rejuvenate the intricate fabric of women's socio-cultural existence. Moreover, they aim to uncover and shed light upon the various manifestations of women's symbolic communication that often remain concealed or marginalised within the broader societal context. In this context Margaret Mills' (1998) support for the incorporation of performance-oriented folkloric feminist women's genre and its practical implementation has garnered recognition for its ability to dismantle long-standing assumptions regarding authority, agency, and power dynamics.

The genealogical significance of folk drama within the realm of theatre history can be attributed to the notion that if the folk play originated from an ancient ritual; it is plausible that drama itself may have emerged from a similar origin. The comparative analysis of the Bhadu as folk ritual and the select play *Bhadraja* (trans. *The August Girl*, 2018) reveals a shared underlying concept. This article endeavours to establish a genealogical connection between the gradually 'eroded' Bengali folk cultures of Bhadu and the contemporary theatrical production of *Bhadraja* (2018), a Bengali play composed and directed by Sudipto Chatterjee. Incorporating insights from various academic disciplines such as folk culture, performance theory, feminism, and anthropology, this study aims to provide a comprehensive exploration of a nearly forgotten Bengali folk culture known as Bhadu. By drawing upon these diverse discourses, the research endeavours to present a detailed analysis of this cultural phenomenon. Spanning from the eighteenth century to the present day, the play-text delves into various sociological issues that encompass a wide range of dimensions, including environmental imbalances caused by the illegal poaching of tigers, deforestation, displacement of indigenous communities due to urban development, the violation of female sexuality, and the intricate world of royal politics. Throughout this exploration, we will examine the involvement of different societal strata, from the highest echelons of the Singh Deo royal lineage to the local Matan family, which plays a significant role in the love story of Bhadu. The theatrical production of *Bhadraja* offers a compelling interpretation of the renowned folk cultural festival Bhadu, incorporating a diverse array of components drawn from the dynamic domain of folk drama. The present study examines several fundamental inquiries pertaining to the Bhadu tradition as a form of *lok* or folk culture. These inquiries encompass the historical origins of Bhadu, its association with specific geographical regions and the communities that actively engage in its practice. Furthermore, the study aims to explore the extent of cultural recognition bestowed upon this folk tradition, if any, as well as any endeavours made to preserve the prevailing narratives surrounding Bhadu. Additionally, the ecological aspect of folk drama within the Bhadu tradition has been investigated, followed by an exploration of the evolutionary process undertaken to revive and enhance its popularity. Chatterjee's play, *Bhadraja* (2018), skilfully raises a myriad of thought-provoking inquiries that resonate deeply within us.

Folk culture serves as a means of national self-expression and imparts insights not just into specific cultures, but also into the broader aspects of

humanity. The emergence of folk theatre in India can be attributed to the dynamic interplay of socio-economic and political forces. Additionally, it emphasises the emergence of several regional languages around the nation and their ongoing efforts to maintain their distinct socio-cultural and linguistic identities. Both in colonial and post-colonial era folklore has been used for the establishment and consideration of political power. Folk here implies the lower-class people and folklore as the expression of their class-consciousness; like which Antonio Gramsci defines as 'popular religion' and therefore the entire systems of beliefs which are collectively put together under the name of 'folklore'. The varied forms of folklore, especially of the lyrical and musical nature have been frequently utilised as a vehicle of protest by the artists. With the popularisation of technology, the audio-visual means of communication not only aids in documenting or digitising or archiving the folklore to give it a validation of empirical authenticity but also restructure the traditional boundaries which effectively determining the existence and evolution of that particular folk tradition. In that sense, folklore is not only being represented and cultivated by those collectors but the urban performing artists including theatre practitioners also deserve the same credit as they reinterpret those traditional genres and present them more attractively before the audience. It is worth mentioning that the uniqueness of urban folk theatrical performance lies in the fact that it takes the vital onus/responsibility of channelising the contemporary Indian socio-cultural reality by adopting the existing folk-traditions simultaneously as with the live folk cultural practice among their conventional performers and age-old locales. Thus, it can be said that this kind of attempt in which folklore by transmission, though not originally, but someone's approach to folklore definitely denotes the genuine approach to folk itself.

The cultivation of folklore mostly examines the religious beliefs, culture and rituals of a certain tribe, taking into account its proximity to rural surroundings, in this context, the acknowledgment and support of folk theatre are contingent upon the patronage of the local rural population and authorities. The play *Bhadraja* narrates the story of Bhadu, a princess abandoned in the forest but is subsequently adopted and raised by a tribal family, with a focus upon religiosity, culture and rituals. During her formative years, Bhadu experiences the adverse effects of political manoeuvring within the royal court, which ultimately results in her being elevated to the esteemed position of a living goddess. The local community has attributed anthropomorphic qualities to her, therefore venerating her as a village deity. Bhadu's resurrection has emboldened her to

expose the corrupt nature of royal politics and renounce her divine status. The process of Bhadu's maturation unfolds as a result of a transformative movement aimed at safeguarding her feminine identity. Her process of evolution as a continuing cultural phenomenon, contributes to the development of a new body of knowledge within the realm of literature. The current 'new lores' derived from the Bhadu stories are few and only reference them tangentially. For example, Neelkantha Ghoshal's Bangla novel *Bhumikanya* (2006) partially borrows and reinterprets the Bhadu story in a contemporary context. The present play *Bhadraja* tries to conflux the rural setting into the ambience of urban dehumanisation by adopting the Bhadu myth. The contradictions between myth and reality, rural and urban, royalty and democracy, reoccur throughout the drama. The play undergoes a multifaceted process that incorporates folk and tribal aspects. Bhadu, as an oral narrative inside folk culture and its dramatic representation amid urbanisation, articulates several fundamental debates.

Triadic Relativities of Folklore, Literature and Performance

The scholarly examination of folklore and literature has predominantly centred on the analysis of a specific artistic creation, exploring its historical context, antiquity, and cultural origins, with a particular emphasis on folk traditions and practices. The present study advocates for a methodology that prioritises performance in the examination of folklore and literature. To summarise E.K. Chambers' (1967) view, folklore itself emerged from its root in anthropology and antiquarianism as an independent discipline, denoted to the study of 'survivals' from a more a primitive phase of social and cultural development, among which folk beliefs and their associated customs could indeed be seen as an archaic alternative or the detritus of heathen mythology and heathen worship. Performance is a demonstration of culture, one of the products of men getting together with other men and working out expressive means of operating together. Each performance is symbolic re-enactment of crucial behaviour patterns upon which the continuity of a culture hangs and is thus endowed with the emotional authority of the necessary and the familiar. Social scientists place the work of art at the centre of the group and epitomise them through stylisation and performance. Though the process of creativity is not essentially different in oral and written literatures, but there are certain performance features which are very different and it is precisely these traits which tend to be emphasised by the folklorists or the critic in considering the relationship between folklore and literature.

The complementary relationship between folklore and literature helps to discover a survival strategy, and therefore strongly evolutionary and progressive in nature. The assumption of the lore-in-literature approach has been that; literature is an excellent source of folklore in discovering the existence of those items of lore that had somehow found the secret of the artistic power of such creations. This approach continually has drawn upon traditional peasant beliefs and customs as a means of establishing tone and setting. Under such circumstance, these regional writers primarily ground their literary productions firmly in the soil of some specific geographical section or locale, representing this in terms of local dialectal features or in descriptions of quaint manners, customs and beliefs. Both folklorist and creative writer are attracted to the image of life in agrarian mould, with its strange blend of cooperative activity and self-sufficiency, all derived from an extended family frame of reference and willingness to live in harmony with nature. They commonly utilise retrogressively and sentimentally the agrarian values and their associated styles and conventions to present the peasant world view. This image of life usually turns on seeing life in cyclical terms of seasons. This signifies as well a change of form from the socioeconomic agrarian and extended family perspective to the prosecution of ego-centered motives, and it is at this point that cyclical and linear perspectives often come into conflicts.

The influence of such views of E.K. Chambers's (1967) and Roger D. Abrahams (1972) upon theatre historians has had decisive implications for the place and the treatment of such customs as display recognisably dramatic features in folk theatre. The survivalist view of folk plays as the 'detritus' of primitive ritual reflects folklorian notion of cultural evolution. According to this, the culture of a given society advances through a fixed sequence of savage, barbaric and civilised phase, represented respectively by magical, religious and scientific responses to the external environment in the important business of individual well-being and collective survival (Pettitt 2). Anthropologists identify and explained this approach as a fertility-rite practised by primitive societies to ensure the vitality of the reproductive faculties of crops, herds and men and hence the survival of the community. In Indian context, situating in the intersection between folk culture and festival, Bhadu qualifies all those aforementioned criteria.

Bhadu's Cultural Valence in Oral Narrative and in Folk Theatre

In India, orality and literary tradition have been co-existed for a very long time. The great epics *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana* and the ancient religious texts of Indian literatures bear the testimony of oral tradition. Likely, folk tradition of Indian culture is memory based oral narratives. Terry Gunnell argues that oral narrative being a living social phenomenon, has a historical, social, anthropological and folkloristic context, something which is both uttered and equally important – received, passed on, recreated and developed, not just as words but as a series of images, symbols, sounds, associations and textures – in short, the text has gradually gained ‘thickness’ (Gunnell 8). Again, the dynamics of oral narrative marks its performance quality which suggests that all living folk narrative can be seen as dramatic performance. Folk narratives should be seen as a form of ‘dramatic’ performance is that they centre on the dynamic of the central active performance and less active observer: they occupy the optic-occulomotory involvements. Contextualising the arguments, the select play *Bhadraja* and its original folk narrative Bhadu disclose the prevailing myth around the Bhadu - its divinity and actual fact to suppress the reality gleaned from multiple elements of visual context and semiotics. Apart from the play-text itself, the musicality, rhythm, gestures and the particular spoken dialect explored in the play contextualise the socio-historical milieu of the performance space in unearthing the actual meaning of the oral narrative. As folk narratives and orality often possess underlying social messages and political agendas, folk legends therefore encompass narratives pertaining to the regional and individual context, a characteristic that similarly extends to current legends that have been embraced. In the same vein, the spoken folk narrative of Bhadu here operates as a multifaceted phenomenon generating a coexisting alternate reality in the current context. Thus, it could be argued that contemporary methodologies for analysing the complex attributes of drama and theatrical performances are likely to be more advantageous in addressing the intricacies of oral storytelling. The select play explores this aspect.

Presently, majority of ancient oral narratives including their associated cultural traditions, rituals, and festivals, are on the edge of deterioration. Enduring influence of the colonial residue compels the general populace to embrace superficial popular culture while disregarding its rich indigenous cultural heritage. Folk narratives provide a unique vantage point from which we can not only retrace our illustrious past, but also serve as a pioneer in finding solution against the escalating ecological crisis. Revitalisation of folk narratives

by recreating newly acquired literary lore establishes cultural penmanship and sincere efforts for literary artists. Adhering to the modern socio-political viewpoints, these literary creations express contemporary concerns through the medium of indigenous tradition and narrative. Thus, folk narrative serves as the missing link that unifies/connects the cultural past with the present day. The understanding of folk culture in non-western context also includes worship, sacred retellings or a visitation by deity. Folk drama has changed over time and evolved eventually. Transforming the folk culture Bhadu and its related myth into an urbanized theatrical performance, the play-text *Bhadrajaa* not only intersectionalises between festivity and folk tale but characterises the “folk drama (which) can teach us something not only about particular culture, but about humanity at large” (Tillis 11).

Folk cultural performance, being vernacular, intrinsically ties to imitate social, political and cultural context, while folk drama offers insight into and transformations of society unavailable in other expressive forms. Folk drama, a valuable window into culture, acts as a medium for tracking gradual transformation of society. Originating from ritual and festival, performance of folk drama strongly celebrates the indigenous culture, religious and ritual functions of a community. Therefore, the questions of interplaying of context, form and function in folk drama raise the constitution and role of both actors and audience by asking whether the audience must be local for a drama to be ‘folk’ and such argument lies in the central for differentiating folk from popular and elite drama. Although erstwhile scholarly arguments (Abrahams, 1970 & 1972; Frazer, 1900; Dundes, 1969;) place the folk drama into an evolutionary and comparative framework because of its ritualistic origin, but ‘the devolutionary’ premise cautious about the decaying nature of folklore which observes its inclination from ‘culturally high’ to ‘culturally low’ strata of society and thus modern society witnesses merely a fragment of shadow of its former self. Again, the connection between festivity and rituals revolves around the cyclical agrarian calendar which links to ancient myths in folklore while folk drama emanating from sacred religious beliefs and ritual thus evolves into festival custom and then becomes the provenance of professional performers.

The select play *Bhadrajaa* (2018), a rustic rendition of folk-based literary text, therefore questions how a particular folk-culture related to its contemporary social/political/ecological context can be examined since folk drama functioning like a holdover from the past is not rooted in modern problems. But mirroring the contemporary social issues of ecological terrorism caused by illegal poaching,

deforestation, demolition of indigenous people and culture in the disguise of urbanism, the current play-text extends previous linkage between folk drama and ritual enriched with new applications. In the domain of folklore cultural studies, this paradigm shift of folk drama indicates this reconceptualisation not as a holdover from the ancient past, rather it is syncretic, emergent and modern productions to be analysed historically. This play, therefore, is re-envisioned as enactments that not only speak directly about contemporary concerns but also is a species of action designed to articulate relationships for the purpose of accomplishing social change. The play focuses on performers reconstructed from memory to show contemporary socio-political events and bringing the women folk of the community together. Besides reflecting upon the larger array of festive activities, this drama captures the larger custom of the seasonal or calendric celebration of harvesting the paddy namely 'Bhadoi' along with rituals, festivals and cultural performance. The play-text *Bhadraja* is a customary drama contextualising the occasion of Bhadu 'puja'.

Again, folk theatre involves in transformation through its meta-communicative messages with others. This transformation occurs not always in accordance with pre-existing social norms and structures. The trend of 'play activity' in folk drama illuminates the interplay of folk drama, festival ritual and other related forms featuring its cultural performance in a reflexive way. Instead of mirroring society, it emphasises upon the process of doing so. Often, this transformation manifests through rebellion during the time of festivity. Although festivity and seasonal customary nature of folk drama make the celebration and ritual functions as an integral part, it seems surprising whether people may use festival in inciting protest and violence or not. Recognising the two-way relationship between festivity and rebellion in folk drama, the exploration of social change is thus viable through rebellion or revolution. In terms of gender and sexual orientation, placing the power of reflexivity and potential for transformation in the hands of ordinary people, the play-text *Bhadraja* depicts the protagonist Bhadu/ Saheli as rebel who protests against social evil.

Preliminary Knowledge about *Bhadu*: A Folk Cultural Narrative of Bengal

Bhadu, a folk cultural festival associated with the western frontier of West Bengal, is predominantly celebrated in specific restricted regions of Purulia.

Amidst the district of Purulia, the region encompassing the *Jungle Mahal*¹ usually witnesses this *lok* (folk) culture in the Bengali month of *Bhadra*². The Bhadu festival, dominating in a specific geopolitical region of West Bengal, has intricately intertwined with the socio-historical and politico-economic landscape of the area. In reality, the evolving perspectives of modernisation, urbanisation, and sanskritisation of the *Jungle Mahals* influence heavily upon the sociology of this festival. Generating resistance to this modification, this discussion may disclose multiple unanswered questions of Bhadu. Despite the socio-economic factors responsible for diminishing the cultural milieu and significance of this *lok* festival, the residual splendour strives to preserve the tradition for future generations. While gradual decline of Bhadu culture over time signifies the demise of a tribal culture, but continuous scholarly attempts to resurrect/revive this vanished culture by preserving its rituals, predominantly unknown composers of scattered Bhadu songs and melodies signpost the restoration of intangible cultural heritage.

Usually, the festive and worshiping traditions of Bhadu are analogous and complementary to each other. Because of the absence of certain kinds of performatives like compulsory priesthood, caste hierarchy or particular ritual timing (*Nirghanta*) for celebrating this, Bhadu's unconventional 'puja' (worship) pattern mark its anomaly. Interestingly, enriched with humanity, Bhadu's 'feminine entity' overpowers her status of female deity. While her pan-mythical image elevates Bhadu to the status of 'Manabi', then despite being marginalised female she epitomises religiosity among her people. Her worshipping as 'female goddess' stands for cultural empowerment. Existing oral narratives describe Bhadu as a daughter of the Royal family of Kashipore, Purulia and her elevation to the 'deity' according to unscripted rituals and festivity pertaining to her life has been considered to be the most reliable and authentic sources till date. Bhadu, also known as Bhadrabati or Bhadeswari (one of the numerous avatars of the goddesses Durga and Kali), descended from royal ancestry, was captivated by a boy of non-royal descent; nevertheless, the marriage did not transpire for

¹ The colloquial term 'Jungle Mahal', literally the 'Jungle Estate' is a geographical territory consisting of districts like Purulia, Bankura, West Midnapore and Jhargram of the Indian state of West Bengal. It belongs to the hilly part of Chota Nagpur plateau. This is a thickly forested region inhabited by the tribal people such as Santhal.

² Bhadra (August - September) is the fifth month in the Bengali calendar and named after the nakshatra Bhadrapada, a constellation in Hindu astrology. Though this month marks the beginning of autumn in Bengal, but it is considered to be the barren period for doing any kind of auspicious occasion like marriage etc.

unspecified reasons, ultimately leading to the demise of Princess Bhadu. Although local legends connect the alleged marriage and premature death of Bhadu with the matter of casteism, but the assertion linked the pre-marital assassination of Bhadu's lower-caste spouse, driven by royal politics, devastating her, ultimately leading her suicide. However, enigmatic nature of her death might be a suicide or an instance of 'honour killing.' In commemorating her legacy, the royal family introduced Bhadu worship to the populace, which subsequently evolved into a folk festival. Representing a clash between myth and reality, Bhadu encompassed only an abstract image of a human deity. No written records, aside from the music performed at this festival, can be located for archival purposes. While most of the songs depicting diverse ceremonies including harvesting practices, and agricultural lifestyles of rural community, but consciously omitting the songs meant for either marriage ceremony or dedicating to the departing soul of Bhadu that raised several disputes questioning not only their existence but also the credibility of such occurrences.

Following this, the suspicion raises that the 'Bhadu complex' is an academic fabrication, which has led to the debunking of any royal family affiliation with Bhadu. In order to conceal Bhadu's tribal heritage, she was coerced into a regal connection through political means. Possibly being a tribal orphan girl, Bhadu was later adopted by a stately king and impregnated by him as well. It would be possible to establish the caste conflict if we adhered to the prevailing narrative that she committed suicide because of her lower-caste partner's untimely demise prior to their marriage. Here, her royal aristocracy stands as an impediment against the unrequited inter-caste love and marriage that ultimately culminates into her tragic unfortunate death. The rumour or any news regarding the murder of Bhadu's 'lower-caste' lover could be ignited a mass antagonism against the King of Kashipore. She is epitomised here as a pioneer of inter-caste marriage as well as a protestant against such social evil. Professor Roma Chatterji (2007 & 2011) opines that some folklorists assume that this festival was started by the King to deflect the force of a rebellion among his poor subjects led perhaps by a woman. Under such circumstance, the royal family obviously requires a strong motive to exonerate them from the guilt of honour-killing and thus the royal family propagates/initiates the Bhadu festival in memory of the Princess Bhadu. Royal patronage or propaganda for this festival acts a trope to masquerade or manipulate the stately people about this filthy politics. Therefore, the myth of Bhadu has been popularised with an internal politics or vested interest to hide the actuality. These cross arguments intricate the scholarly conflicts more

powerful: firstly, 'Bhadu' as a Hindu royal girl would not be betrothed in the Bengali fifth month of Bhadra as it is considered to be the barren month i.e. *molomas* as per Hindu ritualism; secondly, the premature death of the royal princess was hardly printed in any contemporary newspaper. An angle of organised/planted royal politics cannot be overlooked in this regard. The inauguration of Bhadu festival is thus a hunch: it maybe a commemoration of downtrodden people who personified or internalised the pathetic deaths of Bhadu and her lover.

Analysis of the 'Bhadu' festival as a symbol of productivity and creativity may partly justify the popular myth. Juxtaposing the festival spirit with agricultural perspective of Bankura and Purulia where the females celebrate Bhadu, the renowned Bengali folklorist Ashutosh Bhattacharya (1965) finds a close affinity in nomenclature between the Bhadu 'festival' with the Bengali month 'Bhadra'. The unmanageable topographical distribution of nature makes the lands for cultivation into famine-prone and barren, resultant into unprivileged seasonal harvesting of the crops *Amon* rice. Instead, the geographical area seems favourable for cultivating the *Bhadoidhan* or *aaushdhan*³ in the month of Bhadra. The abundance production of crops and subsequent harvesting in Bhadra creates festivity and rejuvenates hope for living among people. Sources reveal that the King of Panchet from Purulia encouraged poor and marginalised farmers in cultivating those barren lands and planting *Bhadoi* paddy that became successful green revolution. Introduction, celebration and popularity of Bhadu denote that productive accomplishment from royal perspective.

The folk festival of Bhadu is creative too because of its musicality. The songs composed during this occasion serve as a nucleus for this festival. Songs are mostly memory-based and transmitted to generation through orality. Though, the methodology of songs composition is debatable, but researchers and practitioners claim that songs are composed instantly. Availability of a handful printed version of such songs in form of *hetoboi*⁴ and its annual addition of more songs question about the reality of such songs. Dominant illiteracy in those

³ In West Bengal *Amon* (winter rice) and *Aaush* (autumn rice) are two common seasonal paddy harvesting usually in the months of October- November and rainy season respectively.

⁴ *Hetoboi* is the very slim volume with a shining front cover; usually printed and published by local press and available in rural weekly market in a cheap price, generally Bhadu songs have been archived in such volume.

regions supports the view of memory-based orality against the composition of songs. Actually, songs composed on the eve of this festival, are the only living evidences of this folk culture. Lack of unscripted lyrics aligned with intellectual procrastination defers in systematic archiving of songs.

Additionally, being women-centric ritual-based musical festival, thematic concerns of Bhadu songs enriched with gyno-centric lyrics automatically echo feminine dynamism of quotidian lives of rural women. Pregnant with contemporary social issues, the myth-driven narratives of songs knitting from female experiences generate powerful impact upon female psyche. Besides theorising a feminist perspective of this festival, close analysis of such songs open avenue for women liberation and a strong medium of consciousness-raising. Surprisingly none of the Bhadu song mentions a single lyric devoted to her nuptial ceremony. Though, the historical data shows apathy in examining the truth of pre-marriage ceremony and the tragic ends of Bhadu, but absence of epithalamion and womanly fantasy of marriage revives the debate/doubt of Bhadu myth. More specifically, inertia toward marriage is prominent in those songs. Most of the songs show proclivity to articulate sympathetic sensation derived from unrequited marriage caused by royal conspiracy and controversial demise of Bhadu and her lover. As the select play *Bhadraja* re-creates the Bhadu narratives for theatrical purpose, therefore the dramatist sometimes deviates from the popular storyline and tries to incorporate/project authorial imagination to contextualise it with contemporary time period.

Textual Analysis of the Play *Bhadraja* (2018) Revolution of Bhadu

Composed into brief twenty-four scenes, the current play *Bhadraja* ranges from two different time periods - the eighteenth century and the contemporary time to connect the threads of events happening in the play. There are only five central characters that change their roles as per requirements of scenes and obviously follow the timeline of two different periods by adopting the language difference in their conversations. While the dramatic events are progressing discursively, the different timeline of the play can only be demarcated by the using of regional dialect and contemporary language in dialogues. Though dramatic conversations engage fourteen different characters with individual name, but every single character is assigned with more than one role/s. While wandering in the 18th century, the play talks about the revolution of Bhadu: her transformation from daughter to deity. However, the central female lead

Bhadu/Bhadrabati/Bhadreswari/Saheli allocates with three roles roaming in two different time periods. The play revolves around the past and contemporary events through the life-cycle of Bhadu in her familial roles of daughter, mother and lover. Right from the beginning, the play describes 'Bhadu' as a collective entity who represents the whole female-folk. Bhadrabati introduces herself: "Myself Bhadu. Born in the month of *Bhadar*. That's why I am Bhadu. But many more girls also were born in this month. So, Bhadu, represents the whole female-folk. Bhadu is NOT one and only; rather so many. Bhadu is for all" (Chaterjee 5). With the progress of the play, we can notice the Stately King of Jungle Mahal, Mahatab Singh Deo deflowers Bhadu twice – first in her Bhadrabati incarnation and second in her Bhadreswari *avtar*. During his annual visit to the forest of Bhadoria, he meets the celestial beauty of Bhadu and desires her immediately. It was a forceful '*gandharba*' marriage to appease his physical hunger but ultimately, he abandons her in destitute. His lecherous male gaze upon the female body of Bhadu provokes him to deflower the forest essence of her puberty. By dint of his royal power, Deo almost forcefully marries her to quench his perversion and lust. Being lust-stricken, without taking consent from her, Deo actually engages himself into the crime of marital rape. Bhadu's parents and lover Matan are handcuffed before the royal power. Hence, Bhadu victimises doubly into the web of patriarchy and regality. After impregnated, she visits the Deo Kingdom for claiming the paternal right of her upcoming child, but, leaning before his wife's pressure, Singh Deo denies recognising Bhadu. Ultimately, she left the world during childbirth but survived with a girl child. Again, in his second visit to the forest, Singh Deo has forcefully taken away the daughter Bhadreswari aka Bhadu from her kin to the royal palace.

Apparently, it seems that he felt guilt and repentance for his past deeds, but soon audience-reader can realise his filthy trajectory. In this respect, the Scene 17 of the play offers a witnessing of the ritualistic affairs pertaining to the demi-goddess Bhadreswari. This scene not only denotes her attaining of deity-hood but also dismantles implicit meaning of a ritual that may unearth the secret or vested politics behind such performance. In a spectacle, placing Bhadreswari into the central stage some women perform rituals by singing songs composed for Bhadu *puja*. Whereas the worshipping of Bhadu is restricted to the women only function but in contemporary time period Pratap/Singh Deo makes few changes to this age-old family tradition and participates briefly in chanting the mantras from the *shloka* of *Durga Stotram*. During his chanting the frequently changing atmosphere of theatre stage's colours from dimming into bright/luminous red

and blue accompanied by the background music of fast beating sounds of *madal* project an appalling imagery to measure the gravity of the situation. Pratap's character also shifts to his old version of Mahatab. Incidentally, during this ritual, Mahatab makes a circumambulation around Bhadeswari with a self-explanatory confession to chart his past hindrances as well as to envision the beauty of his daughter simultaneously. Apparently, his song visualises the physical beauty of Bhadu: "Behold the idol of Bhadu/ the wavy curves of her body/ provoke my desire/ look her face, how she binds her hair/ the tress touches her back like a snake" (Chaterjee 46), but later this somatic exquisiteness stimulates him toward decisive perversion and delirium. The visual replication of the scene in yielding before his animalistic libido Mahatab pounces upon her and engages himself in incestual rape with his biological daughter. His delirium here serves as a confession/ revelation of his innermost desire for the physical entity of Bhadrabati when he utters:

"...Bhadreswari, (suddenly he realizes that he utters a peculiar word) ... Bhadere Sharir (i.e. the female body of Bhadu).... Human body is the cause of all evils and sins." (Chaterjee 47).

Here Mahatab's dramatic action (performing rituals) and reaction (hysterical outburst) manifest the essence of his mental illness, i.e. his excessive uncontrollable libido lay in the fact that strangulated effects are put forth into an abnormal behaviour towards his daughter. Theatrically, Mahatab/Pratap's this kind of hysterical gesture can be understood through the model of Victor Turner's 'social drama' (1982). Theoretically, following this model, the presentation of a hysterical body usually serves as an object of public spectacle on stage. In Turner's notion, social conflict is marked by dramatic events and in this process, he identifies four phases in social drama – breach, crisis, redress and reconciliation or irreparable breach. As per Turner, social drama unfolds when there is a 'breach' or violation of normative modes of life which if not properly addresses, may lead to a state of crisis which in turn may capable of splitting or disrupting the social order or fabric. However, in response to this situation redressive action arises. Generally redressing refers to any action bring forth in response to/against the ongoing social crisis. It may be a political debate or legal procedure or military action. But Turner specifically shows interest about the role of ritual in cultural performance as an instrument of redressing. While a successful redressive action leads to a reconciliation, but reversely redressive action may also propel towards fuelling a crisis and may gradually turns to an irreparable breach which can be resulting into an inevitable social turbulence. By

raping his daughter Bhadu, Mahatab exemplifies the theatrical 'breach', while his attempts in hiding this heinous crime and the subsequent murder of her denote the 'crisis' which ultimately culminates into a public protest to mark the 'redressing action' in this social drama. Chatterjee cunningly uses the punning to make him a confession to the audience. The play does not disclose the death of Bhadu towards us; rather keeps it as a mystery – whether it's a suicide or murder?

However, Bhadrabati and Matan resist a lot to prevent the patriarchal bestiality of Deo, but they fail. In their arguments over this matter, Bhadu tries to console Matan: "the king captivates my body only, not my mind. ... The female body is not the leftover meal. ... I engrave your image upon my heart." (Chaterjee 16). The everlasting cliché concept of chastity and purity of female body has thus been discarded when he adopts the motherless daughter of Bhadu and rears her with filial affection. Actually, Deo not only abandoned her in destitute but also smashes the passionate and fatherly feelings of Matan twice. The irony of the play lies in the fact that the patriarchal feudalism not only violates the female body, but also thwarts the humanity of those soft-hearted males (her father and lover) who cares enough for their daughter or ladylove. Prasad Mahato and Matan, Bhadrabati's respective father and lover, both belong to forest and hail from the lower strata of the social order, while Deo enjoys the lavish regal life in a Stately palace. A subtle distinction between the forest life and materialistic life among them seems so prominent that makes her life more intricate. She now easily differentiates between the forestry love, affection and simplicity she nurtured within and the convoluted royal materialistic pleasure hampering her peaceful life.

Bhadrabati's journey towards the Deo palace marks the beginning of her misfortune. The royal mother Ahilya, the senior married wife of Deo attacks her vehemently despite knowing the actuality. While harshly criticising her husband for this unlawful second marriage, she frequently uses diatribes insulting Bhadrabati. Scorching with jealousy, Ahilya's venomous mind confuses the bliss of marital bondage with that of the credit of motherhood and dominance upon household works. She even thinks that the sexualised female body is the springboard for reviving and pursuing the long-term conjugal relationship. Ignoring the momentary promiscuousness of Deo, she imposes false allegation of seduction upon Bhadrabati cajoling her nubile femininity. In her utter desperation and depression, she bursts into tears and reaches to the nadir of vulgarity when she accuses Bhadrabati:

Ahilya: “My misfortune. What a bitch you are! You got impregnated by him with a single copulation?? Are you carrying eggs in your womb? You just need incubation!, isn’t it??? Or it’s the impact of strong majestic semen of the King? Alas! He lost interest in me. I have no juice left to squeeze nah!! I am such an old hag. He doesn’t even touch me!!... But how do you seduce him so quickly? ... You slut, displaying your feminine parts...?

...

Bhadravati: Oh! It’s unbearable. What will happen to my womb?? I didn’t ask your husband to force me, to marry me or to violate my virginity! NO, NO, Never!!! (Chaterjee 28).

The conflicts of Ahilya, Bhadrabati and Deo remind the triangle of marital relationship. Though Bhadrabati was victimised against her consent, Ahilya, despite knowing her husband’s womanising nature, accuses her profusely. She never shows any sympathy or solidarity to her, rather terrorises her husband by dint of her parental powers. The conflict ends with the pressurised deceit and denying the parental responsibility and identity of Bhadu’s upcoming child from Deo’s end. But neither has he corrected his flaw nor controlled his distorted physical hunger. After a hiatus, he again returns to the forest where his biological daughter Bhadreswari has been grown up and nurtured by her grandparents and foster father Matan who adopted her. Instead of showering affection, he tries to hide his unbridled bestiality under the masquerade of religiosity imposing divinity upon his daughter. In Scene 23, we can witness the public outrage as the death news of Bhadu has been broken out among them. They show their ire against the royal palace. To mitigate the mass backlash the king declares the official demise of Bhadu very tactfully. His euphemistic attempt to dodge the cause of death of Bhadu compels him to fabricate a divinity for her. His oath in introducing the Bhadu worship and subsequent categorisation of it as ‘women-only-ceremony’ denotes the subtle politics of Indian culture. The female divinity in religiosity and cultural practice hide the harsh truth of women suppression. Deo just plays this trick to hide his heinous crime. The concluding scene (Scene: 24) serves as a conjecture to investigate the truth of Bhadu’s death. Chaterjee provides a platform to Bhadu to justify or to judge her divinity over humanity. She directly interacts with the audience:

Bhadu: Lie! Utter lie!!! The King has killed Bhadu. It’s a conspiracy. If the King didn’t murder her daughter, she may disclose the harsh truth of her rape by her own father. In that case,

people would revolt against the King. So, Bhadu must turn into a goddess now. So, it's an organized royal conspiracy to save his life and kingdom. A goddess can't be killed, right?? Will the cop identify the murderer?? Actually, men can dishonour the lady and address her as goddess simultaneously. Only men can do it. (Chaterjee 57).

The incorporation of Bhadu's feminine voice thus connects with her revolt against the royal family. This feminine voice reminds us the search for authentication in folklore study. Through her death Bhadu posed as even greater threat to royal authority than she had in life. The only way in which the King could avert a rebellion was by incorporating Bhadu's death into the ritual calendar.

The Evolution of Bhadu

Shifting into contemporary time period, the play is narrated by the royal bride Nirupama to unearth the 'multiple perspectives' (Chaterjee 40) of Bhadu story including its meaning and rituals. The dramatist introduces here a dramatic persona cum anthropologist characterised as *Lekhok* who is doing research by conducting individual interviews with Nirupama, Pratap and a villager to accumulate information and tally their views in order to extract an ultimate truth about Bhadu. In her conversation with the researcher, Nirupama as a native informant describes the history and specialty of Bhadu puja of the royal family which was initiated by the senior king Mahatab Singh Deo who decided to shift his resident from the west to east due to the ongoing political turmoil caused by *Bargi*⁵ attack in the 18th century. He was only able to save his ancestral family goddess a golden idol which was later established and popularised as Bhadu puja in their present resident. From their conversation, we come to know about the 'multiple perspectives' of the Bhadu myth. The genesis of Bhadu introduces her by incorporating into the family as an adopted daughter followed by subsequent divinity, three steps rituals and the secularism of puja. According to the 'multiple perspectives' of Badu myth, the story-line from old era fabricates the assassination of Bhadu's lover before their marriage; while another source confirms embracing of her sageliness and left home followed by the devotees

⁵Bargis were the light cavalry mercenary group of the Maratha Empire who wallowed in a large scale of plundering in the countryside of the western part including the Panchet of the Bengal during the Maratha invasions of Bengal in the time period of 1741 – 51. It caused a colossal economic loss in then Bengal Subah.

who continue their worships in memory of her kindness. Again, another story describes her plunging into the *Jauhar Brata* ⁶ to save herself from the Maratha atrocities.

Unlike the *pouranic* goddesses Durga, Kali, Lakshmi, Saraswati, Bhadu is not a prevailing mythological goddess; rather she was elevated to the divinity with some vested interest. Despite her kingly aristocrat upper caste lineage, Bhadu gains popularity as ‘devi’ (goddess) among lower caste, working class people. Again, like the royal female saints Mirabai or Akka Mahadevi, she neither composed any poems or songs to preach her customary religion. Therefore, her popularity remains enigmatic. Nirupama in support of Bhadu’s humanly spirituality argues by saying that ‘Indeed Bhadu is a princess, but Bhadu puja is a secular, people’s festival (Chatterjee 39). The human element in performing rituals discards/overpowers its religiosity. This puja is exempted from the recitation of Sanskrit mantra by a priest; instead, it performs rituals with songs. The ritual itself is not very elaborative –starting with invocation, following the *charan puja* i.e. Bhadu’s feet are anointed with oil, turmeric and *sindoor* (vermilion powder), finally, an *arati* with lamp and incense sticks. The ritual continues with the *balidan* (sacrifice) where a cucumber is mandatorily sacrificed before the idol. The cucumber symbolises the phallus here. The ritual ends eventually with the immersion of Bhadu idol at the dawn.

Although Nirupama recounts fastidious details of Bhadu festival and rituals but evades the scandalous history related to it. The contemporary period highlights the evolution of Bhadu as an oral narrative by contextualising the ecological imbalance of forest caused by illegal poaching of tiger. Despite her hatred of present descendent Pratap Deo Singh’s promiscuousness, she maintains royal aristocracy in her interactive session. The present king Pratap, a businessman by profession, indirectly involves with illegal poaching of tiger from their stately forest to flaunt his affluence among friends. He shows craving in narrating the bravery of his father who hunted a man-eater tiger Gourgosain⁷ to save the villagers. But Pratap’s intention behind the killing of tiger seems to be loathsome and avaricious. Besides, his interest in hunting, Pratap like his predecessor Mahatab, has many illicit relationships including with his widow

⁶ The ritual of mass self-immolations was practised by the Hindu Rajput females of Rajasthan to avoid the capturing and the subsequent rape and sexual enslavement at the hand of Islamic invaders.

⁷ In Bengali, the term ‘gour’ means white. Unlike natural yellow-blackish skinned tiger, the man-eater tiger killed by Pratap’s grandfather, was identified for its unusual whiteness of the skin.

sister-in-law Nirupama, Nayeb's wife and their teenage daughter Saheli. Citing her mother's beauty Pratap compliments Saheli as 'sweet tomato! so cute!' (Chaterjee 21) that denotes a derogatory meaning for woman. Nirupama disparagingly criticises his profligacy as *rakter dosh* i.e. the blasphemous legacy of womanising in their blue blood. Unfortunately, the researcher witnesses the historical repetition of Saheli's rape and murder at the hand of Pratap which indirectly validates the killing of Bhadu.

Royal family members show their reluctance and cautiousness in discussing scandalous past of Bhadu, but they describe it as women-only worshipping ceremony where men including the King are precluded to participate. The royal legacy of the month-long carnival that was previously organised by Pratap's mother and aunt now has been succeeding by Nirupama. The collective supremacy of female-folk reflects the matriarchal flavour of this festival. Pratap's recollections of childhood memory about Bhadu festival mainly marks through the consumption of delicious local sweets like *marang jalebi* and oversized *khaja* and shares how his aunt composed psalm to legitimise the worship of Bhadu with the pantheon of traditional Brahmanism. This puja also got patronage from the royal family in past but now sponsored by allied corporate houses of Pratap. His recollections clarify how the oral narratives of Bhadu evolve through time and mutates with interpolation. The cultural fabrication of Bhadu allied with interpolation/mutation clarifies the folkloric evolution of 'Bhadu' in due of time. Also, the shifting patronage of Bhadu from the local royal family to the merchandised house connotes the corporatisation of folk culture and festival in contemporary time.

Chaterjee consciously draws some vital questions throughout his play. Meticulous research and fieldwork for this play project contemporary history, political turmoil, myth and truth which are going simultaneously. The feudalistic dominance of Mahatab later transforms into a patriarchal cruelty of royal gene passing through the promiscuity of Pratap. Dwindle from past history of the royal family to present reality; audience witnesses recurring events of Singh Deo's abnormal craving for female body and sexuality through flashback that overlaps the conflict of myth and reality found in Bhadu complex. While the previous timeline constructs the story of Bhadu's divinity to suppress the rape and subsequent suspicious death of her, contemporary story retells the Bhadu myth and purposefully hides the obnoxious link between tiger-poaching and the royal family politics. Pratap's lavish lifestyle turns to be devastating for the forest and its dwellers as for making shoes he plans to kill a tiger. Previously, he

narrates the story of a man-eater tiger *Gourgosain* with its great pug-mark and how his paternal grand-parent hunted the same to save their people. Again, the deflowering of Bhadu's body as well as her uprooting from forest culture by Mahatab implies the symbolic deforestation. Bhadu's human body here not only means a physical entity; rather it represents the holistic Bhadoria forest itself. Bhadu's premature death denotes gradual diminishing of nature. Pratap's consecutive exploration of female body starting with Nirupama, followed by Nayeb's wife and daughter Saheli attest his perversion and incessant search for abhorring sexuality. The closing scene depicts the King alias Pratap wrapped himself into a tiger skin, roaring violently and smitten his face into yellowish-black colour. The scene projects through the shadow puppetry reflecting upon a pentagonal white screen that creates the vindictive effect of Pratap's perversion. The last scene seems indicative in the sense that human cruelty and greed are more vicious than animal: it not only relegates the human faculty but also jeopardises the ecological balance. Chaterjee conveys a strong message through his play: while the premature death of Bhadu foretells abatement of forest culture and fading grandeur of Deo dynasty, Nirupama's reluctance in sharing meticulous details of Bhadu narratives symbolises the cultural silencing of an intangible cultural heritage. Again, Pratap's masculine views about the absentia of male in Bhadu and unwillingness to discuss the inner motivation of this puja prove his gender bias. Their deliberate suppression of family secrets will be treated here as a process of cultural memocide⁸ (using Mahato's term) and erasing the ethnic memories which may affect the course of folk cultural history negatively. Therefore, the revolution of Bhadu must be accessible for all to recognise the evolution/revival of Bhadu in present time.

However, in the play, Pratap's acceptance and laments over the dearth of no written document seems to be genuine. Except the available few *hetoboi* which records songs, the royal family library preserves a diary which collected festival songs written in Maithili language denotes their effort of archiving the gradually faded folk culture Bhadu. Chaterjee utilises total twelve (12) songs to contextualise different situations, psychology and implications of characters and events in the play. While most of the songs sung by individual dramatic personas like Matan (Scene 2, 8, 12, 13, 19), Villager (Scene 11), Mahatab (Scene 17) and

⁸ By this term Mahato (2000) suggests that despite the peaceful co-existence of oral and literary tradition in India for a long time, only a few folk cultural forms got promotion due to the elite artistic inclusions through Shantiniketan while other prominent folk arts dwindle for the dearth of patronisation.

Nayeb (Scene 20) to manifest their innermost desire, sadness etc, only three songs (Scene 1, 13, 17) have carolled in form of chorus. The introductory chorus in Scene 1 narrates the forthcoming departure of pregnant Bhadrabati alias Bhadu from her parental house to marital house of Deo dynasty. Tuned with sentimental notes, the second chorus introduces Bhadu's daughter Bhadreswari who once left by her father Mahatab but now he comes with a claim of parental right upon her. Mahatab's sudden filial affection and claim for his daughter create dramatic conflict which not only justifies his past misdeed, injustice towards Bhadrabati but also defines pretentious royal repentance. Parbati, Bhadrabati's mother and Bhadreswari's grandma sarcastically uses two words like *shikar* (prey) and *swikar* (accept/admit/confess) to differentiate the royal action of Mahatab. Devoted to the ritual of Bhadu worshiping, third and last chorus chants about the praises for Bhadu in which women's urge to the goddess: "Dear goddess Bhadu, our mother/ we are singing this song for you/ we are at your feet/ please shower us with the paddy of Bhadoi/ and bring back the prestige for our daughter" (Chaterjee 45) catches the basic storyline of Bhadu where rice and chastity seem to be index for social respect. Mahatab's neurotic behaviour, his perversion and the subsequent rape to his biological daughter trace a close affinity with Sylvia Plath's confessional poem *Daddy* (1962). Also, pursued by a doe-like image wrapped with deer skin and horns, Mahatab's first meeting and ensuing attraction towards the physical beauty of Bhadrabati in the play reminds the iconic scene from the Sanskrit play *Abhigyan-Shakuntalam* by Kalidasa in which the King Dushyanta marches towards Sage Kanva's hermit and meets Shakuntala for the first time. Again, Mahatab's chasing of deer image in the play also denotes the epical cajoling of Rama in the Ramayana. Even, the repetition of deer image can be seen in popular Turkish television series *Ertugrul* (2014). So, the deer image can be interpreted here as a symbol of love, attraction, illusion, lust and destruction concomitantly.

In contrast with Mahatab, songs allocated for Matan in the play mostly signify his estrangement from his beloved Bhadu and adopted daughter Bhadreswari. Sounding like a lover's anxiety or a lullaby, sometimes his songs function in interlinking the narratives of Bhadu in two different time periods. Similarly, Nayeb's song narrates the royal crisis caused by the mysterious death of his daughter Saheli in contemporary time. The implicit meaning of class struggle dominates in the lyrics: "Hey King, why are you intentionally touching the fire/ why are you attracted the crime/ do you think you can get a mercy from yourself" (Chaterjee 52) - not only connotes the intentional crime and

lecherousness of the King, but also serves as a fatherly urges seeking the poetic justice against the crime made by the King. Comparatively, the villager's song provides a new angle about the gender fluidity of Bhadu narratives. Chatterjii opines that the emphasis on the songs especially on the lyrics, has helped to crystallise a particular disciplinary perspective which assumes that folklore is necessarily concerned with the search for the authentic voice of the people and that the feminine voice is the privileged site of this authenticity (Chaterjii 13).

Wrapping up: Bhadu's Fate: Can be Revived/Survived?

Popular Bhadu songs, rituals and festival enriched with religious elements denote the female positionality within the indigenous culture. Reflecting the contemporary sociological ups and downs, these songs narrate the multiple feelings of female psyche. Available songs actually accumulate the scattered events from lives and society and chart how the females react to such events. Sometimes the depth of such reaction is so radical that it turns into a protest. Song composers utilise the Bhadu festival as a large platform to sensitise women awareness about socio-political surroundings through these songs. The socio-political simulative lyrics of Bhadu songs become a medium of 'consciousness raising' among the uneducated, poverty-stricken, rustic non-tribal women who suffer the most torturous patriarchy and multiple ostracisation due to caste, class and gender. Saheli's protest and Nayeb's song in the play feature this radicalism.

The triptych of Bhadu festival, songs and rituals actually remind urgency of public communication with the atavistic rural society where several females expect the empathetic intervention of mainstream society. The Bhadu culture may be the fruitful avenue to get in touch with those neglected segments of society where cultivation of feminism is nothing but an absurd phenomenon. A serious academic intercommunication on Bhadu possibly opens up the relevant cultural advantages or way out: firstly, a rejuvenation of Bhadu festival will save an ancient popular folk culture from extinction. Chaterjee's attempt to rewrite the folk narrative in contemporary context and its alignment with a medium like folk theatre may help to revive the same for surviving a cultural heritage of Bhadu. Secondly, an organised preservation will help to archive the memory-based songs and the rarely printed *hetoboi* of such festive songs. Pratap's mentioning of his family diary containing Bhadu songs in the play provides this archival evidence for preserving such folk culture. Finally, centralising upon folk culture like Bhadu, Indian feminists see possibility to work upon grassroot feminism by accumulating large number of unprivileged rural women folk.

Inclusion of primitive women including their culture may redefine the indigenous feminist ideology in Indian context that may usher holistic liberation for women. It is a common practice in history to show ignorance and gender bias while dealing with the archiving of women-centric/related cultural texts and performance. The blasphemous history of cultural politics always demonstrates animosity in preserving the women writings. Belonging to the marginalised people of the rural segment, the women-centric ritual and festival of Bhadu requires proper restoration for surviving the feminine/womanly cultural practice and incorporating into cultural history. We may hope that the proposition of printed version of Bhadu song-books steps into the possibility of archiving folk culture. Again, the composition of new literary piece like the play *Bhadrajaa* will prevent the extinction of such folk culture.

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What Has Heritage Got to Do with It? Understanding the Built Environment of Bodh Gaya's Foodscape

Pooja Kalita and Aruna Jayasena

Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of food, heritage, and the built environment in Bodh Gaya, Bihar—a site globally recognised for its spiritual significance as the place of the Buddha's enlightenment. While existing heritage discourses emphasise the tangible, monumental value of the Mahabodhi Temple, this paper foregrounds the foodscape as a crucial yet overlooked part of the cultural and spatial life of this heritage site. Drawing on ethnography and theoretical engagements with heritage studies, urban anthropology, and food studies, this paper argues that food plays a pivotal role in shaping contemporary heritage spaces. In other words, it is a significant element of the process of heritagisation. It highlights how gastro-development, class, hygiene, and global branding are reshaping Bodh Gaya's urban heritage within the paradigm of neoliberal macroeconomic transformations leading to increasingly profit-driven food stalls; often at the expense of informal food vendors and local residents. The paper also stresses that popular sites like Bodh Gaya exemplify the complexities and contradictions that intertwine with foodscapes, heritage tourism, and urban development. Further, it fosters larger marginalisation of the local food vendors, alongside gender and racial disparities under the ubiquitous commodification of tourist and heritage destinations. By placing the foodscape at the centre of heritage discourse, the paper calls for a broader, more inclusive understanding of heritage that recognises everyday practices and social contestations.

Keywords: Bodh Gaya, Food, Foodscape, Heritage, Tourism

Introduction: Beyond the Monument

Bodh Gaya's status as a UNESCO World Heritage Site is grounded in its association with the enlightenment of Gautama Buddha under the Bodhi tree. In the contemporary notion of Buddhist pilgrimage, Bodh Gaya is considered an essential site to be visited in India, as attaining Nirvana (the ultimate bliss) is the most significant event in Gautama Buddha's spiritual life. This spiritual and historical significance attracts hundreds of thousands of pilgrims and tourists annually. At the heart of the site lies the Mahabodhi Temple, which, for many heritage narratives, becomes synonymous with Bodh Gaya itself. Yet, to view Bodh Gaya only through the lens of the monument is to overlook the layered, dynamic, and lived environment that surrounds it. The built environment of Bodh Gaya comprises streets, shops, cafes, hotels, street food vendors, and transient interactions that cater to and shape the experience of both locals and visitors. Of particular interest in this paper is the foodscape - the socio-spatial terrain where food is prepared, sold, consumed, and regulated.

In asking, "What has heritage got to do with it?", this paper interrogates why food, despite being a major medium through which tourists and pilgrims engage with the site, is absent from most heritage narratives. Not only the foodscapes that we interrogate in this paper, but heritage studies have also, albeit briefly, touched upon the gradual manifestations in the lives of local populations, their livelihoods, and especially the alternative culture it generates in popular heritage destinations. Heritage, must be understood as embedded in everyday life as (Hosagrahar 283). In form, processes, practices, and knowledge, that go beyond static icons. For Hosagrahar, heritage is not about old monuments or iconic structures but as deeply embedded in the everyday life of communities. Heritage encompasses a range of **dynamic processes**, practices, and knowledge that shape and sustain local environments. Instead of focusing solely on preserving physical sites, there is a need to advocate for an inclusive approach that acknowledges the aspects of heritage such as local traditions, rituals, and daily interactions. This perspective expands heritage studies to recognise the continuous, evolving nature of culture, urging for a more holistic, sustainable approach to urban development and heritage preservation.

It is widely accepted now that mainstream heritage studies have long privileged the tangible-monuments, buildings, and archaeological sites; often at the expense of the intangible and experiential. Laurajane Smith's critique of the Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD) challenges this fixation, arguing that it

centres elite, expert-driven understandings of heritage (Smith 29). Smith's concept of the **AHD**, as outlined in her work, critiques the dominant narratives in heritage management and preservation. As such, AHD refers to the official, institutionalised framework that defines and legitimises what is considered valuable heritage that equates static representations of the past. Smith argues that this discourse marginalises **alternative** or **living** forms of heritage, particularly those that do not conform to these official standards. She calls for a more inclusive approach to heritage, one that recognises multiple voices and perspectives, reflecting the diverse, dynamic ways in which people relate to heritage in contemporary society. In other words, AHD marginalises everyday practices and disempowers communities whose relationships to heritage are more lived than learned. Hence, it underscores the need for heritage studies to be **decolonised**, allowing for the preservation of heritage not just as fixed sites or symbols. Moreover, recent approaches—like the Living Heritage Sites program, Wijesuriya urges a shift toward recognising how communities interact with and reinterpret heritage sites in their daily lives (Wijesuriya 3).

The Living Heritage Sites program similar to the critique of the AHD, challenges traditional, institutionalised approaches to heritage preservation. The Living Heritage Sites program emphasises the active involvement of local communities in heritage preservation. It stresses that heritage is not static but is shaped by the living practices, knowledge, and traditions of communities. This approach encourages communities to become custodians of their heritage, recognising the dynamic, evolving nature of cultural expressions. Also, both the Living Heritage Sites program and Smith's critique of AHD advocate for a more inclusive, fluid understanding of heritage.

This shift in the understanding of Heritage aligns with the 2003 *UNESCO Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage*, which emphasises the subjectivity of heritage as a lived phenomenon. While the 2003 UNESCO Convention, the Living Heritage Sites program, and the critique of AHD all emphasise the subjectivity and dynamic nature of heritage, they approach these ideas differently. The UNESCO Convention offers a global framework for recognising intangible heritage, with a focus on safeguarding and transmission. In contrast, the Living Heritage Sites program and Smith's critique challenge the institutionalisation of heritage, emphasising local engagement, community practices, and the evolving nature of heritage. Nonetheless, they all share a vision of heritage that goes beyond static monuments and incorporates the living, evolving cultural expressions of communities. As an off-shoot of this discussion,

the next section primarily focuses on the built environment of the foodscape of Bodh Gaya.

Mapping the Foodscape of Bodh Gaya

As the title of this essay suggests, the primary question is about delving into the connection between a heritage site and food. In other words, what is so significant about a discussion on the foodscape of a heritage site; which is different from what can be found in any other public spaces? To begin with, it is a commonplace understanding that any public space or a tourist destination in India or broadly in South Asia exhibit such a characteristic. However, when it is about a heritage site, particularly a religious heritage site such as Bodh Gaya related to the life of the Buddha, it has served as an inspiring symbol to lead a life devoid of greed or desire for material pleasure. Yet, contrary to that, this paper underlines that even a heritage site such as Bodh Gaya, that is crucially linked to the life of the Buddha, is not devoid of the profit-making ventures of the neo-liberal market that is starkly visible through the eclectic foodscape. Further, it argues that pleasure and profit seeking endeavours often go hand in hand when contemporary neo-liberal tourism aesthetics becomes an ally of what is popularly understood as a 'heritage' site.

Now, food plays a central role in expressing identity, transmitting knowledge, and anchoring cultural practices in place. The concept of culinary infrastructure—institutions, artifacts, and networks that enable food practices helps contextualise food as part of the material and institutional landscape (Pilcher 105). Culinary infrastructure reframes food practices as part of a larger system of material, technological, and institutional structures that are integral to everyday life. By examining food as both a cultural and material phenomenon, this perspective encourages us to consider the broader context in which food is produced, consumed, and understood. It emphasises the need for a multifaceted approach to both heritage and food studies, one that recognises the interconnections between food and the institutional, technological, and social systems that enable and constrain food practices. This conceptualisation of food challenges the focus on food as an isolated cultural expression and highlights the interdependence of society and the built environment in shaping culinary practices. Thus, Pilcher's concept of culinary infrastructure can be applied to the foodscape of Bodh Gaya by examining how the institutions, artifacts, and networks that support food practices contribute to the development of its tourism-based food culture. The intersection of local food vendors, global food

chains, and evolving culinary expectations reflects the complex material and institutional landscape shaping Bodh Gaya's foodscape as part of its heritage tourism infrastructure.

Moreover, the concept of gastro-development, describes how food culture becomes a strategic asset for urban growth, economic investment, and tourism branding (Kinkaid and Platts 1330). They argue that food culture is not merely a social or cultural phenomenon but a dynamic force that shapes a city's identity, making it more appealing to both tourists and investors. This framework is especially relevant for Bodh Gaya, where food becomes a vehicle for both economic upliftment and social exclusion.

Now, Bodh Gaya's foodscape is characterised by eclectic diversity. As one walks through its bustling lanes, it is not uncommon to encounter Tibetan momos, Italian pasta, Indian thalis, and Mughlai biryani; all within a few hundred meters. Global brands like Domino's, along with heritage-heavy names like Karim's from Delhi, coexist with humble food carts selling samosas or wood apple juice. These spaces serve various consumer classes. International pilgrims, middle-class Indian tourists, and local working-class residents all interact with this landscape, but not always on equal terms. The foodscape becomes an arena of negotiated consumption, reflecting both inclusivity and exclusion. Restaurants, cafes, and food stalls are not simply commercial additions. They form an integral part of the built environment that sustains heritage tourism. These establishments generate employment, attract investment, and facilitate prolonged stays, especially during peak seasons.

Moreover, these culinary nodes influence architectural aesthetics, sanitation planning, traffic flow, and even policing. They are part of what Pilcher calls the culinary infrastructure, the framework that enables, regulates, and represents food practices. One of the earliest insights from the fieldwork came during a mid-morning walk through a narrow, sun-dappled lane just a short distance from the Mahabodhi Temple. A small shop stood cluttered with fabrics of various textures and colours - silks, cottons, synthetic blends, stacked high on makeshift wooden shelves. Printed sarees hung from the low ceiling like soft curtains, gently swaying in the breeze from a tired pedestal fan. The owner, a man probably in his late fifties greeted us politely but with the quick efficiency of someone used to tourist small talk.

As we struck up a conversation, he took pride in narrating stories of his foreign clientele, switching easily between Hindi and basic English. He told us how he could identify a customer's nationality just by their mannerisms. It was clear that he saw himself not just as a shopkeeper but someone who was attuned to the rhythms and tastes of the global tourist flow that animates Bodh Gaya. When we asked him about food in Bodh Gaya, what visitors typically eat, or if there are any local dishes that tourists seek out, he paused, frowned slightly, and then laughed dismissively. "Who thinks about food in Bodh Gaya?" he said in Hindi, drawing out the words with an air of incredulity, as if the very notion was misplaced. He continued: "*Log yahan bhagwan ke liye aate hain, bhookh ke liye nahi. Sab kuch milta hai—Domino's se leke dosa tak. Khaane ka kya tension?*" (People come in search of God here and not to satisfy hunger. You get everything - from Domino's to Dosa. One does not have to stress about food).

His tone was confident, even slightly amused, as though we had overlooked something obvious. Yet behind this offhand remark lay two layered assumptions. First, he viewed pilgrims as a homogenous group of ascetic travellers, spiritually motivated and supposedly detached from material desires like food. Second, he regarded food as so abundant both in variety and availability, that its presence required no further interrogation. But it was this very dismissal that revealed something deeper: an embedded contradiction in the heritage narrative itself. Food was everywhere in Bodh Gaya's streets, noodles sizzling in woks, the aroma of freshly fried samosas, menus advertising pizza, momo, and thukpa in five different languages, but it remained largely invisible in the way people like him articulated what mattered in Bodh Gaya.

This interaction brought into sharp focus a form of heritage blindness, where food's omnipresence in the built and experiential environment is simultaneously acknowledged and trivialised. It exposed how certain sensory and material elements, like taste, smell, and consumption remain outside the bounds of what is considered legitimate heritage, even though they are central to how people (locals, pilgrims, tourists) engage with the site. The fabric shop owner's framing of food as both irrelevant and inevitable pointed to this paradox, making visible the silent infrastructure of feeding and being fed that quietly underpins the spiritual economy of Bodh Gaya.

Branding, Aspiration, and Culinary Capital

A couple of days after this conversation mentioned above, an image which particularly caught our attention was of Karim's Hotel. Karim's Hotel or Karim's is a famous restaurant located near Jama Masjid in Delhi, India. Established in 1913, the restaurant has been described as "synonymous with the area of what is demarcated as Old Delhi or Purani Dilli that derives its legacy from the Mughal rule in Delhi that popularised the Mughlai cuisine. We noticed that there were quite a few such hoardings throughout Bodh Gaya. A few steps away from where we had encountered the first hoarding of Karim's announcing its grand arrival in Bodh Gaya, we noticed the outlet of Domino's and then some others, that have gained a name of its own. The establishment of popular food brands emerging both within India and outside of it has been a new addition to the built environment and the variety that Bodh Gaya's foodscape offers. Dominos as an international food chain has recently established its foothold. With such establishments, gradually we understand the importance of brands and brandings in food. For example, although food that is similar to what Karim's offers such as the dish of mutton korma might have had presence in the foodscape, the reputation of Karim's makes it a matter of new excitement. Such brands become part of what is known as culinary infrastructure.

One of the tour operators, a man in his forties told me that "it is good when such brands are allowed to establish such restaurants, it adds to Bodh Gaya's status. These food chains or brands have a proven record of providing quality. The people working there are more professional and hygiene standards are always maintained. With the development of the place, when financial condition of people gets better, they aspire to explore new things. *"Unhe saukh hota hai"* (They develop that hobby). Thus, it is important to meet their *shaukh*. *Shaukh* which can be translated to the English word hobby indicates that food becomes a matter of hobby rather than hunger in the context of tourism, sight-seeing, and the pleasure and fun related to it. Even the locals in addition to the tourists start experiencing Bodh Gaya through the prism of consumption. Food-related hobbies like cooking, foraging, or gourmet dining reflect social capital and taste (Richards 14; Bourdieu 3). In tourism, food has become a key motivator, with culinary tourism offering authentic, localised experiences (Ellis et al. 259). Consumption in this context extends beyond eating to include the acquisition of experiences, knowledge, and cultural capital. These activities blur the lines between necessity and leisure, making food a dynamic site where identity,

pleasure, and consumption converge. Thus, food functions as both a personal hobby and a key driver of experiential consumption in tourism contexts.

Narratives about quality and hygiene further accompanied the idea of *shaukh*. What was becoming clear was that street food stalls like the ones depicted in the picture have been pushed to a zone of precarity where they are not only vulnerable to be victims of beautification projects but also climbing down the popularity level among the relatively well-off locals who are able to afford more expensive food attached to brands. While talking to a street food seller and his experiences with the mushrooming of restaurants and cafes, he pointed towards a group of pilgrims with their white attires going towards the 'Main' temple. Although from nowhere we could see signs that would specify their nationality, he was confident that they must be from either Thailand or Indonesia. "These people would never have food from our stalls. Although our food is also hygienic, the travel agencies which bring these groups here to visit Buddha's place of enlightenment never want them to have food from us. We have no relation to such big group of foreign tourists whatsoever. These travel agencies work on commission system which they get from big hotels and restaurants". When asked about people who do not travel in groups, especially individuals from foreign countries who travel on their own, he replied that – *"Hardly few come. They need to be convinced we are hygienic"* He again pointed out towards another street stall selling wood apple juice and uttered - *"Like that one"*. The stall that sold wood apple juice across the street.

When we went near it, the banner at the front clearly mentioned that they use mineral water because they 'care' for their customers. However, the owner did not have much of a different story to narrate. "Not a lot of tourists come here. Some locals do when they are on their outings. Affluent tourists or pilgrims mostly go to bigger places for food and drinks. But now it is important to portray explicitly that our food and drinks are clean and would not cause them any trouble" However, interestingly, as we were joined by another elderly man who was enjoying his lunch break from the hotel he works in, commented – *"I am telling you, you cannot trust this bottled water. Have you seen it while the bottles were getting filled up or packaged? Then how do you know it is more hygienic than tap water. This all is a farce to loot people"*.

Even though street vendors are often associated with undesirability and dirt in most bureaucratic imagination of a 'modern' urban context, one cannot deny the essential functions they perform. They perform the essential function of

serving the urban working-class poor. Scholars have noted that street food vendors contribute significantly to urban economies and offer accessible, affordable meals, especially to working-class populations (Bhowmik 115). Yet, they are often positioned as obstacles to urban cleanliness, order, and modernisation. This tension is shaped by both governance and aesthetics: city authorities frequently frame street vendors as informal, unhygienic, and encroaching on "legitimate" urban infrastructure.

The spatial politics of street food are deeply tied to notions of class, visibility, and legitimacy. While food enthusiasts and tourists may romanticise street food as authentic or exotic, local regulations often criminalise the very presence of these vendors in public space. Urban redevelopment projects, in particular, tend to marginalise street vendors in the name of beautification and global competitiveness, reinforcing exclusionary visions of the modern city. Ethnographic accounts show that street vendors constantly negotiate precarious existences navigating bribes, evictions, and shifting public perceptions. Their “undesirability” is less about food itself and more about the social anxieties embedded in informal economies and contested urban space. As the ideas of what is meant by quality, hygiene, good and appropriateness clash; one witnesses the interaction of the notion of global with the local. This is elaborated in the next section.



Fig. 1. Karim's Hotel



Fig. 2. Wood apple stall

Global and the Local

One example of a ‘global’ food space is the Happy café, amidst the ‘local’ of Bodh Gaya. It is a café with only a few selected items such as pancakes, pasta, hummus, shakes, coffee etc. meant for a clientele with certain class privileges. It was

established by an Italian woman who is married to an Indian man settled in Italy. She saw great potential for a flourishing business here and went on to establish the cafe. It is true that Happy café is frequented by many tourists and pilgrims and some locals. Although, the frequency of non-locals is few in the café, that however does not mean that it is any less popular. It has popularised itself as an aspirational global space. It is a common sight to see tourists and pilgrims from different parts of the world sipping coffee, chatting, working on their laptops with the free wi-fi. The workers are neatly dressed in uniforms and have a working knowledge of English. They all are locals though. Although the café runs only for the few months during the winters, they get half of their salaries rest of the time. Even during covid, they were earning. *“That’s the best part about working in these big international spaces”*, one of them commented.

Even when the food there is difficult to afford for a vast majority of locals, it still has been a reliable source of income for the workers. While on one hand these kinds of spaces would be applauded for such aspects and for introducing the locals to the ‘real’ taste of pasta, as one of them commented, one cannot deny the narrative of the ‘global’ has propagated a homogenous exclusive idea of hygiene and quality. It shows how values are being created on a logic of white possession through which the value of land and resources is greatest when in the controlled or associated with western white people (Launius & Boyce 940; Moreton-Robinson 3). The concept of “white possessive,” describes how settler-colonial states invest value in land only when it is controlled by or associated with whiteness. In this framework, possession is not just a legal status but a cultural logic through which indigenous sovereignty is erased and replaced with white entitlement. This logic creates a hierarchy of value, wherein the worth of land, cultural practices, or knowledge increases when associated with Western or white actors. This process has been documented in various contexts. Racial capitalism functions to extract value from racialised bodies and geographies while displacing them from ownership and visibility (McKittrick 950). In urban contexts, redevelopment and gentrification rely on racialised imaginaries, where urban space becomes “valuable” once it is whitened—either demographically or aesthetically. Real estate markets produce value through racialised logics that view white settlement as a stabilising force and non-white presence as risky or undesirable.

In the Global South, informal settlements and subsistence economies are rendered valueless until absorbed by formal, capital-driven development projects often underpinned by colonial legacies and Western investment narratives

(Gidwani and Baviskar 42; Sanyal 559). It reveals how value is not neutral, but produced through enduring colonial, racial, and capitalist logics. The figure of the white owner, investor, or tourist is not incidental. It is often central to how legitimacy, cleanliness, authenticity, and profitability are constructed in both material and symbolic terms.

If we go back to the comments on hygiene in the context of the water bottles during our fieldwork, that has been previously mentioned in this paper, we understand that there is no universality in the definition of what is hygienic. Nonetheless, what gets propagated is an exclusive idea that is dubbed as global and aspirational in conjunction with the promotion of Bodh Gaya as a popular heritage destination. This in turn raises questions of who can afford and access it, both as sellers and consumers of food. Thus, the foodscape operating under the banner of gastro-development or as a form of the culinary infrastructure, transforms a place in a new economically productive ways with uneven outcomes.

Street stalls, including street food stalls getting chased out during important events are usual occurrences. Discussions and often murmurs of street stalls getting permanently displaced or shifted under the garb of beautification and development are not uncommon either. The ideological basis of such process resonates in reference to the city of Colombo in Sri Lanka. Sasanka Perera observes;

These structures are essentially class and status enclaves, from which many people are left out, by virtue of an inherent atmosphere of exclusivity and the associated social discomfort. In a sense, in these postcolonial times, these resurrected spaces recreate the exclusivist behaviour that was openly exercised in many of these same places at the height of colonialism. Now, however, the methods and objects of exclusion have changed. Today, this exclusion is engineered by locals against other locals (Perera 29).

A selective version of local is accepted, popularised and glamourised which has to appeal to the global but certain aspects have to be discarded. Another interesting thing about Bodh Gaya's foodscape which is continuously attempting to reach a certain level of the global is the inconspicuous presence of women. Women hardly have presence as cooks, waitresses and servers. Even in the latest

food establishments of restaurants and cafes where they employed uniformed English-speaking staff with the discipline of serving world class tourists or locals employing women is not a welcoming proposition. Public spaces of food consumption, are still male dominated. Although the traditional gendered notions of purity and pollution might not be applicable but notions of women not able to do heavy work or be out in public for safety reasons are perpetually referred to. Local women's engagement with urban consumption spaces, such as food stalls, cafés, or tourist markets, is deeply shaped by gendered social norms. Many are expected to adhere to family-imposed codes of propriety regarding when, where, and with whom they can appear in public. As a result, they often restrict their movements to certain places during certain times of the day, avoiding spaces perceived as male-dominated or morally ambiguous. Scholars have shown how public space in South Asian cities is not equally accessible: it is policed formally and informally by cultural expectations about female respectability (Phadke 1513). Women's mobility is often negotiated within a framework of surveillance, respectability, and fear.

In contrast, local women frequently perceive female tourists, particularly white women, as enjoying greater freedom of movement and dress. These women appear to embody a kind of gendered mobility that is largely unavailable to locals. However, this perceived freedom is complicated by issues of racialisation and sexualisation. White women travellers are often exoticised and hyper visible in the global South, seen both as aspirational and as morally ambiguous figures. Their visibility, while affording them a certain consumer power, also makes them vulnerable to harassment and unwanted attention. Indeed, being stared at, photographed, or propositioned is not uncommon highlighting that mobility does not equate to safety. The racialised and gendered body becomes a site of projection for fantasies, anxieties, and power dynamics. White women may appear “freer” but are also subject to being read as sexually available, particularly in societies where foreignness and whiteness are conflated with permissiveness.

This juxtaposition underscores how access to urban space and leisure is differentially structured through intersections of gender, race, class, and local moral economies. Freedom and danger are never mutually exclusive they often coexist in complex and contradictory ways. Many a times, spaces like Happy café or Dominos are a preferred option particularly from the point of view of safety as they serve a particular clientele privileged by class; although perception and

reality might not go together always. The built environment of Bodh Gaya's foodscape is yet to become sensitive to gendered experiences.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the intersections of street food economies, gendered mobility, racialised systems of value, and urban heritage in Bodh Gaya, a significant Buddhist pilgrimage site. The ethnographic insights into the built environment of the foodscape in Bodh Gaya reveal how food as both an economic practice and a cultural artifact—becomes a contested space within the broader dynamics of heritage tourism and urban development. The foodscape of Bodh Gaya, dominated by street vendors and local eateries, serves as both a cultural expression and an economic lifeline for many residents, yet it remains largely excluded from the global circuits of heritage tourism that prioritise high-end restaurants and westernised food experiences. As an urban heritage site, Bodh Gaya is a site of cultural commodification in which the sacred and historical value of the town is frequently framed within global tourist expectations. Yet, much of the tourism infrastructure from luxury hotels to curated restaurant experiences fails to integrate the local foodscape in a meaningful way. Street food vendors, such as the ones near the Mahabodhi Temple, are marginalised despite offering culturally authentic, hygienic, and affordable meals. Their exclusion reflects a 'white possessive logic, whereby the value of food, land, and culture is recognised only when associated with Western or capitalist ownership (Moreton-Robinson 5). As these vendors operate on the margins of the tourist economy, the local foodscape's significance as both a livelihood and a cultural practice is often overlooked.

Food, as a marker of authenticity, is central to the tourism experience in Bodh Gaya, yet its value is racialised and gendered. Local women are constrained by family-imposed norms that dictate when and where they can access public space, including food-related spaces such as markets or food stalls. Their movements are highly regulated, reflecting broader societal expectations of respectability and propriety. In contrast, female tourists, particularly white women, are perceived as having greater freedom to move through these spaces (Pritchard and Morgan 885). This perception, however, does not automatically equate to safety or empowerment. White female tourists, while often seen as symbols of liberation and freedom, are subject to harassment and hypervisibility in spaces like Bodh Gaya, where their presence can be sexualised or objectified.

This dynamic further complicates the local foodscape, where female tourists—especially white women—are often considered the “ideal” consumer of street food, yet are also subject to gendered and racialised risks. The concept of food as a cultural artifact is not neutral; rather, it is shaped by the underlying power dynamics of who consumes, who produces, and who profits (Mintz 5). Vendors like Ramesh often offer a product that is deeply intertwined with the local food heritage, yet their place in the foodscape remains precarious because it is not aligned with the globalised, sanitised, and Westernised food experiences sought by many tourists.

The foodscape of Bodh Gaya highlights the contradictions within heritage tourism and urban development. While the town’s cultural significance is celebrated through global tourism channels, local food practices and informal economies are systematically undervalued and excluded from the economic benefits of these processes. This marginalisation is not simply economic. It is racial and gendered. The foodscape is a contested space, where the value of local food practices is negotiated within the larger framework of global tourism, urbanisation, and racialised capitalism. In conclusion, Bodh Gaya exemplifies the complex and often contradictory relationship between foodscapes, heritage tourism, and urban development. The marginalisation of local food vendors, the gendered and racialised mobility of both locals and tourists, and the growing commodification of space challenge the prevailing narratives of authenticity in tourism. This analysis calls for a rethinking of how value is ascribed to heritage sites, urging urban planners, tourism authorities, and local communities to engage with foodscapes in ways that are more inclusive, equitable, and reflective of the town’s cultural and economic diversity.

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Echoes from Rawain: Tracing Continuity and Change in the Devlang Mela of Uttarakhand

Manisha Singh Rajput, Surendra Singh Bisht and Tarun Kumar Bhatt

Abstract

This paper analyses the Devlang Mela, as celebrated in Gair Banal village, located in the Rawain region of Uttarkashi district in the state of Uttarakhand. It examines the factors that have motivated people to organise various fairs and festivals in the mountainous regions of Uttarakhand. Local fairs and festivals have played a significant role in the development of unique socio-cultural traditions in this part of the Himalayas. The paper aims to contextualise the local cultural festivals, such as Devlang, within the broader definitions of the term 'culture'. It attempts to trace the elements of continuity and change in the observance of the Devlang Mela. The devotion of people of the region towards Raghunath ji, the presiding deity of the Raghunath Temple located in Gair Banal village, has been intact for generations, along with the core rituals and festivities associated with the Mela. However, the Mela has been experiencing several changes due to the forces of globalisation and modernisation. The paper delves into the role that factors such as improved road connectivity, mobile and internet facilities, and electricity supply have played in bringing about the transformation in the ways of celebrating the Devlang in the present time. The hilly regions of the state of Uttarakhand have been witnessing a rapid outmigration from villages to urban centres in the plains, which has also affected the ways of celebrating local festivals, such as the Devlang Mela. In conclusion, the paper highlights the role that these festive occasions play in enriching and preserving the cultural heritage of a region as reflected in the folk songs, folk dances, and various other socio-cultural traditions associated with a fair or a festival, thereby providing the region with a unique identity.

Keywords: Continuity and Change, Devlang Mela, Globalisation, Modernisation, Rawain

Introduction

Historically, the relative isolation of the Himalayas due to its geographical location has fostered the development of distinct socio-cultural practices and traditions in the region. Fairs and festivals held in the state of Uttarakhand have played a crucial role in shaping the social and cultural fabric of the society of this region. Fairs and festivals are an essential means of expressing sociality and community bonding among people, and they are one of the best ways to understand a region's culture. Across the globe, all human groups and classes possess a tradition of fairs and festivals that are integral to their lifestyle and culture. The diversity in the forms and ways of celebrating these festive occasions comes from the interaction between the local natural environment of that region and the knowledge accumulated by its inhabitants over time (Kunwar and Panwar xviii-xix). James Baillie Fraser, a Scottish traveller and author, extensively documented his expeditions to the Himalayan highlands during the Anglo-Nepalese War (1814-16) while visiting India in the early 19th century. He traversed the Rawain region of Garhwal and provided a detailed account of the area's topography, culture, and agriculture. His description illustrates the relative seclusion that the region has experienced owing to geographical constraints that have historically influenced the evolution of its unique cultural traditions (Fraser 463-481).

The term *culture* has been defined in various ways by scholars. It encompasses various forms of thought, speech, and action, including religion, rituals, art, architecture, music, dance, dress, language, and behavioural norms such as law and morality. Culture has a significant impact on our identity formation and in shaping our perceptions of the world we live in. It provides us with a framework for our social actions and gives them meaning. Raymond Williams, in his book *Culture and Society*, characterised culture as the comprehensive way of life for a society (Williams 13-18). Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism*, argues that culture encompasses the methods by which ideas, stories, and images are produced and circulated within a society through various modes of representation, such as art, speech, and writing. These cultural practices may appear to be independent of politics or economics, but they are intricately linked to power dynamics (Said xii-xiii). A. L. Basham analysed India's culture through ecological, historical and artistic lenses. He examined the role of geographical factors, such as climate, soil, flora, and fauna, in shaping Indian culture. In his book, *The Wonder That Was India*, he argued that the Indian

civilisation developed within a distinctly defined subcontinent, bordered to the north by the world's longest mountain range, the Himalayas, which, along with its extensions to the east and west, separates India from the rest of Asia and the world. However, the role of geography should not be overemphasised. Both the settlers and traders have travelled through high and desolate passes into India, and Indians also traversed the same routes. The isolation has not been absolute (Basham 3-7).

In this context, the Rawain region, located in the northwestern part of the state of Uttarakhand, possesses a rich and distinct cultural heritage, as reflected in various local festivals celebrated in the area, such as Maroj, Maun, Lungla and fairs dedicated to deities like Baukh Nag, Renuka Devi, and Pokhu Maharaja, among others. The Devlang Mela, held annually in Gair village of Banal *patti* (a *patti* is a group of villages, historically functioning as an administrative unit) within the Naugaon development block of Uttarkashi district, is also an important festival for the people of the region. In Rawain, apart from Gair village, the Devlang Mela is also held in Gangtari village of Thakral *patti* and Kuthnaur village of Wajari *patti*. Apart from the Rawain region, the festival is also celebrated in regions such as Jaunsar-Bawar, Jaunpur in Uttarakhand and Sirmaur, Kinnaur, and Kullu districts of Himachal Pradesh (Kunwar and Panwar 306; *Uttarkashi Mein Devlang Parv Ki Dhoom, Prasad Ke Roop Mein Di Jaati Hai Raakh*). The present study is primarily based on the Devlang Mela, organised on 1 December 2024, at Gair Banal village. Researchers participated in the fair to gather data, made direct observations, and conducted interviews with many locals. This Mela offers an opportunity to delve into the past and understand the folk traditions and cultural practices that have given the region its distinctive cultural identity. Through an analysis of available historical data, oral traditions, and contemporary observations, this paper aims to identify the elements that have remained unchanged over time and those that have undergone change. By contextualising the Devlang Mela within broader definitions of the culture, the paper focuses on the unique socio-cultural traditions of Rawain as a symbol of cultural adaptability and resilience in the age of globalisation and modernisation.

Socio-Cultural and Geographical Context of Fairs in Uttarakhand

The state of Uttarakhand is home to many fairs and folk festivals, making it a vibrant cultural landscape in the Himalayan region. Various terms are used to denote fairs and festivals in the state, such as *thaul*, *ausara*, *mela*, and *kauthiga*. A festival venue transitions into a fair upon attracting a sufficient number of

visitors (Purohit 53; Sharma xi-xii). A study of the festivals and fairs in Uttarakhand reveals multiple motivations for the hill communities to organise these events. The People of Garhwal have a deep-rooted faith in village godlings and ghosts, believing that fairies, gods, and demons inhabit the forests and hills. In the myths of various villages, every hillock, rivulet, stone, tree, and cultivated area is ascribed to deities such as Shiva, Shakti, Sita, Gaura (Nanda), Naga, or other local folk deities. A sense of gratitude towards natural forces prompts individuals to annually offer *thaul* (a festival and associated ritual) to Bhumyal, the patron god of a village or a collective of villages, as an expression of this respect and appreciation. Similarly, the deities linked to rain, hailstorm, forest, wind, justice, cattle, and those from the Pan-Indian pantheon are venerated through a *thaul*, aimed at revitalising their power and ensuring the safety and well-being of the community (Gairola 31; Purohit 54).

Local gods (*deotas*) rule the lives of people in these geographically isolated regions of the Himalayas, as highlighted by scholars such as Peter Sutherland, William S. Sax and Chetan Singh (Sax 7; Singh 43; Sutherland 82). In the context of Himachal Pradesh, Chetan Singh notes that in large parts of the western Himalayas and the connected regions of Garhwal in Uttarakhand, local gods operate under the institution of divine kingship, where they act as territorial rulers. Local persons act as priests, ministers, patrons, soldiers and servants for these *deotas*. Collective rituals surrounding them contribute to forging the village communities into cohesive social and political units. Local deities are not merely objects of religious devotion but are important social-political actors who play a central role in shaping community identity, notions of justice, and governance (Singh 43).

William Sax, in the context of the Rawain region, highlights the role that local deities, such as Karna and Mahasu, play in the lives of people. They are also regarded as divine kings, who regularly travel in procession through their territories to demonstrate their sovereignty and to ward off incursions by rival gods. They hear civil and sometimes criminal cases and, through their oracles, enforce their judgments (Sax 1). Raghunath ji, the presiding deity of the Raghunath Temple located in Gair village, where the Devlang Mela is held, also holds the status of a divine king, as he is referred to as *Raja* (king) Raghunath by the people of the region. The Devlang Mela represents the centrality of Raghunath ji for the people of the Rawain region, as they reaffirm their allegiance to the deity on this occasion (D. Rawat, Rawain Ke Devalaya Evam Devagathayein 85).

The major fairs in Uttarakhand typically occur during the winter months, which correspond to a period of reduced agricultural activity. Several fairs are also timed to align with significant sacred events, including *purnimas* (full-moon days) and *sankrantis* (movement of the Sun from one zodiac sign to another) (Nand and Kumar 138-139). This region observes various festivals that coincide with seasonal transitions, reflecting the relationship between human emotions and the natural environment. Baisakhi (referred to as Bissu in Jaunsar), Shivratri, Basant Panchami, Maun (a fishing activity occurring in June), Raam Aid (a hunting festival in January), Gindi Ka Mela, Jhakari, and Selpati exemplify the cultural practice of commemorating seasonal transitions (Purohit 55). In historical contexts characterised by limited contemporary transport methods and insufficient road infrastructure, such festive occasions facilitated reunions among individuals and their loved ones. They held a significant place in the lives of married women (referred to as *dhiyans* in the local dialect), who had limited opportunities to step away from their daily obligations in their in-laws' home. Such occasions provided them opportunities for reunification with family members from their natal home, referred to as their *mait* in the local dialect (Purohit 55; Sharma xiii).

Rawain: Administration and Geography

Rawain is the border region of the Uttarkashi district in the northwestern part of the state of Uttarakhand. Uttarkashi is a border district in the state of Uttarakhand, with Tibet (China) situated to the north, the state of Himachal Pradesh lying to its north-west, the districts of Rudrapur and Chamoli to its east, Dehradun to its west, and to the south is the district of Tehri Garhwal. Administratively, the district is divided into six tehsils: Mori, Purola, Badkot, Chinyalisaur, Dunda, and Bhatwadi, and six development blocks, comprising Mori, Purola, Naugaon, Chinyalisaur, Dunda, and Bhatwadi. The Rawain region currently comprises 1. Panchgai, 2. Fateh Parvat, 3. Kothigad, 4. Singtur, 5. Ador, 6. Badasu, 7. Gadugad, 8. Kothigad, 9. Masmor, 10. Pingal, 11. Badiyar, 12. Rama Sirai, 13. Kamal Sirai, 14. Banal, 15. Thakral, 16. Mungarsanti, 17. Barkot, 18. Geeth, 19. Aujari, 20. Godar, and 21. Khatal *pattis* (D. Rawat, *Rawain Ke Devalaya Evam Devagathayein* 27-30).

The mighty rivers Ganges and Yamuna originate in the Uttarkashi district from Gangotri and Yamunotri glaciers, respectively (*Annual Administration Report Tehri Garhwal State* qtd. in Saklani 3). The Bandarpooch mountains stand over the Yamunotri glacier. The mountain's name literally translates to

"Monkey's Tail" and is linked to a legend of Hanuman, the devotee of Lord Rama (Haberman 43). The mountain called *Rarhi-ka-Danda* separates the watercourse of the Yamuna River from the Bhagirathi. The Yamuna Valley is known as Yamuna Pradesh and Rawain in the Uttarkashi district. Rupin and Supin are two important tributaries of the Yamuna River. After their confluence at Naitwar, in the Mori development block, the river is identified as the Tons, referred to as Tamsa in the Kedarkhanda. The Bhagirathi, originating from the Gangotri glacier, assimilates water of the Jadhganga (Jahnavi) in Uttarkashi district, and after its confluence with the Alaknanda at Devprayag, is thereafter known as the Ganga (Saklani 3).

Kartika to Margashirsha: Regional Variations of Diwali in Hilly Regions of Uttarakhand

Among various fairs and festivals celebrated in the Rawain region, the Devlang is a unique festival in many ways. It is also referred to as the *Prakashotsava*, meaning the Festival of Light. Diwali, which falls in the Kartika month (corresponding to October-November in the Gregorian calendar) of the Hindu calendar (Freed and Freed 70), does not hold the same level of significance as Diwali celebrated in the month of Margashirsha (November-December) for the people of this region. According to the Hindu calendar, Diwali in Kartika occurs on the night of *amavasya* (new moon day). It is a five-day-long festival in India. Dhanteras, Narak Chaturdasi, Lakshmi Pooja, Govardhan Puja, and Bhai Duj are observed over these five days. The origin of Kartika Diwali can be traced to ancient India, when it was likely an important harvest festival (Vedalankar 104). As the Hindu religion evolved, various mythological stories and interpretations were attributed to the festival, placing it within a religious framework. The most important myth associated with the festival in North India is the story of Lord Rama (the seventh incarnation of Lord Vishnu) of the Hindu epic *Ramayana* (Singh 455-56). It is believed that Lord Rama returned from Lanka (present-day Sri Lanka) to Ayodhya (his kingdom in North India) on the *amavasya* night with his wife Sita, brother Lakshman, and Hanuman, after killing Ravana (king of Lanka). To celebrate his return, people lit *diyas* (clay lamps), and the tradition of celebrating the occasion as a festival of light has persisted ever since (Chirkut 92).

In the mountainous regions of Uttarakhand, the Bagwali festival is celebrated on the third day of the Diwali of the Kartika month. D.D. Sharma notes that historically, during the winter months, this Bagwali was a festival of light for the hilly people, whose primary occupations were agriculture and

animal husbandry. In folk songs of the Garhwal and Kumaon regions of Uttarakhand, the word "Bagwali" is used to refer to the festival of Diwali. By this time, the kharif crop of paddy is ready, and people prepare items such as *chyude* with rice, which they offer to their *kul deota* (family or clan deity), *isht deota* (personal deity), *bhoomi deota* (land deity), out of gratitude for the bountiful harvest. During Bagwali, there is also a tradition of sending *chyude*, walnuts, and local fruits, such as *dadim* (*Punica granatum*), to married women at their in-laws' homes from their maternal homes. As the Diwali of Kartika currently extends its reach to the hilly regions, the local festivals like Bagwali still hold a significant place in the lives of village folks (Sharma 8-9).

In the Rawain region, another festival of Diwali is celebrated exactly a month after the Diwali of Kartika, in the month of Margashirsha (corresponding to the months of November-December in the Gregorian calendar), known as *Mangsir* in the local dialect; hence, the festival is referred to as *Mangsir Ki Diwali*. Devlang is celebrated as a night festival during *Mangsir Ki Diwali* in this region. Devlang is a three-day-long folk festival. Laudi Bagwal, also known as Chhoti Diwali, marks the beginning of this three-day-long festival on the first day. On this day, people in the village make *mashal* or *ollas* with the branches of deodar (*Cedrus deodara*) and kail (*Pinus wallichiana*) trees. These *ollas* are taken away at night and are made to dance. The second day is known as the 'Badi Diwali' and is celebrated as Devlang in the Rawain region. The third day of the festival is called Balraj, when a game of pulling the rope (*vart*) made of *babda* grass is organised among the villagers (Balooni 138-140). People in hilly regions are dependent on domesticated animals for agricultural work and for their daily needs, such as milk and butter. On the occasion of Balraj, as a token of respect and gratitude towards domesticated animals, such as oxen, they are given complete rest from work, and their horns are massaged with oil (D. Rawat, Rawain Kshetra Ke Lokdeota Evam Lokotsava 156).

The Devlang Mela: Sources and History

The available research material does not provide any specific information regarding the precise origin of the Devlang Mela, who initiated it, or when it was started. The available written historical records on this subject for the region are scarce. In the absence of written records on the subject, the collection of oral sources assumes greater significance. Oral narratives, local folklore, and socio-cultural traditions of the region suggest that the Mela is rooted in the oral history and community memory. Its observance can be dated back to at least a few

centuries. The worship of local deities is a common religious practice in the Himalayan region. Each village or group of villages has a distinct patron god, the *gram deota* or *kshetrapala* and fairs and festivals are held in honour of these local deities. The Devlang Mela in Gair Banal is associated with the deity Raghunath ji. This may suggest the relation that exists between local religious traditions and the origin of the Mela. Historically, the involvement of two different groups, *Sathi* and *Pansai*, and their participation in the Mela may also suggest the involvement of certain social factors in the origin of the Mela. The timing of the fair, at a time when the burden of agricultural work is low on people, suggests that factors such as the local community's need for joy and a break from their daily life may have played a role in its origin and organisation over the years.

There are multiple reasons explaining the celebration of Devlang exactly one month after Kartika Diwali. One story traces its celebration to the prowess and glory of Madho Singh Bhandari, a military commander during the reign of Garhwal's king, Mahipati Shah (r. 1625-1631), of the Panwar dynasty. Folk songs of Garhwal mention tales of his bravery (Raturi 210). It is said that he successfully fought a war against Thapa, a powerful feudal lord from Tibet. The Diwali of Kartika passed, and Madho Singh was unable to return from the war. He returned home victorious after a month, in the month of Margashirsha. To celebrate the victory, the Garhwal king announced that Diwali would be celebrated in the month of Margashirsha. It is since then that the festival has been celebrated to the present time. Another reason given is that people in this region are heavily dependent on agriculture, and the harvesting of crops typically takes place late in the region. People are occupied with their agricultural work in the Kartika month, so they celebrate Diwali in the month of Margashirsha. According to yet another opinion, this region has been associated with the Pandavas and their culture, so the festival is celebrated in their memory. Some people consider that the festival is celebrated in honour of Mahasu *Deota*. According to another tradition, the news of Lord Rama's coronation was received late in this region, hence people here celebrate Diwali in the month of Margashirsha, one month after the Diwali of Kartika month (Kunwar and Panwar 306-307).

In the Hindu religious tradition, the division of time into *Uttarayana* and *Dakshinayana* is associated with day and night for the gods. The six months of *Uttarayana* are regarded as the day of the gods, and the six months of *Dakshinayan* as the night. The term *Uttarayana* originates from two Sanskrit words: *uttara*, signifying "north," and *ayana*, denoting "movement" or "path". It

denotes the period when the Sun commences its observable transition from the southern latitudes, specifically from the Tropic of Capricorn, into the Northern Hemisphere. *Dakshinayana* is the opposite of *Uttarayana*; it denotes the period during which the Sun appears to travel from the Tropic of Cancer to the Tropic of Capricorn, moving from south to north (Goyal). According to this classification, the morning *jagrana* (awakening) of the gods begins on the last *amavasya* of *Dakshinayana*, which falls in the month of Pausha (December-January). The night of *amavasya* is considered auspicious for *jagrana*, and seeing light on this day is considered good fortune. Since the day is considered auspicious, the Devlang is celebrated on *amavasya* (Kunwar and Panwar 307-308). The Upanishads state, *Tamaso Ma Jyotirgamaya*, invoking the divine to guide us from darkness into light. *Amavasya* represents profound darkness; to illuminate it, the night characterised by this darkness must be lit up with light. Sleeping at night can be viewed as a transition, akin to a subtle death, while the act of birth is often associated with the daylight hours. Consequently, waking up at night is thought to be necessary to get rid of death (S. Rawat 72-73).

The Devlang Mela and Its Venue: A Cultural Landscape

The Devlang Mela is held in the courtyard of the Raghunath Temple in Gair village, located on the right side of the Yamuna River (**Fig. 1**). Raghunath ji is the main presiding deity of the entire Banal *patti* in the Rawain region. Two of his main temples are located at Pujeli and Gair-Banal, and they are known as the 'Raghunath Thaan'. Raghunath ji resides in Gair from the month of Asadha (June-July) to the month of Margashirsha (November-December) and in Pujeli from Pausha (December-January) to the month of Jyeshtha (May-June). Apart from the Banal *patti*, even in Thakral and Godar *pattis*, Raghunath is worshipped as the presiding deity. Some other temples dedicated to Raghunath are located in Rama Sirai, Kamal Sirai and Bhagi villages, and Raghunath ji visits these temples during his visit to the respective area or village (D. Rawat 79).

The Raghunath Temple at Gair is divided into two parts. The first part, the *garbhagriha* (the innermost sanctum of a temple where the main deity resides), contains the *shivling* (symbolic representation of Lord Shiva). According to the prevailing beliefs in the region, Lord Shiva is the *aradhyadeva* (the revered god) of Raghunath ji, whose throne has been established in the outer chamber. *Nandi* (the mount of Lord Shiva) has been established near the entrance of the temple. Lord Brahma, Madkeshawar Mahadev, and Danda *Deota* are also worshipped in the temple. Goddess Shakti (worshipped in the form of Mahakali) is believed to

have accompanied Raghunath ji on his journey from Kullu-Kashmir to this place; hence, she is worshipped here as '*Kashmiri Kali*' (D. Rawat 81-82).



Fig. 1. Raghunath Temple at Gair village: Devlang Mela is organised in its courtyard. Photograph by Manisha Singh Rajput, 2024.

People from more than fifty villages participate in the Devlang held at Gair Banal. These villages have been divided into two groups (*thoks*), called *Sathi* and *Pansai*. Traditionally, the terms *Sathi* and *Pansai* have been associated with the Kauravas and Pandavas of the *Mahabharata*. In this region, it is believed that the Kauravas numbered sixty, while the Pandavas comprised five. So, the term *Sathi* refers to the Kauravas, and *Pansai* to the Pandavas. It is believed that in the epic battle of the *Mahabharata*, the descendants of those who fought for the Kauravas came to be known as the *Sathi*, and those who fought for the Pandavas came to be known as the *Pansai*. Their participation in various fairs held in the region symbolises their rivalry (S. Rawat 72). The villages of Banal *patti*, including Idak, Sidak, Dhandala, Gair, Biyanli, Koti, Gadoli, Bharan (*Sathi thok*), Kund, Jaintadi, Chhini, Seena, Koodi, Jakholi, Dhausali, Pujeli, Bakhrethi, and Nald (*Pansai thok*), among others, play a significant role. Apart from Banal *patti*, people from nearby *pattis* such as Rama Sirai, Geeth-Bajri, Thakral, Badiyar, and Badkot, also attend the Devlang Mela (Kunwar and Panwar 308-309). Traditionally, people of Koti and Bakhrethi villages have been given the status of *wajir* (minister) of the deity, and they also chair the temple committees that have been constituted to oversee the temple-related matters. These committees have been operational for generations up to the present day¹.

Socio-Cultural and Religious Dimensions of the Devlang Mela

The word Devlang is composed of two words: *dev* and *lang*. The word *dev* means a deity who is compassionate towards their followers, who helps them overcome adversity, and blesses them after worship. The term *lang* in Sanskrit denotes the vertical shaft of a plough or a palm tree, essentially something with a long trunk or structure. Combining the two parts, Devlang signifies a tall tree or post onto which the image, symbol or depiction of a deity is affixed, thereby creating a Devlang (Naithani 294). In the context of the Devlang Mela, the word 'Devlang' refers to a torch of the deodar tree (locally known as *khabdei*), lit in the name of the god (S. Rawat 73). The deodar is revered as a sacred tree in Indian culture, particularly in the Himalayan regions. The Sanskrit name for the tree, *devadaru*, is derived from two words, *deva* (God) and *daru* (tree), thereby translating as the tree of the god. The tree is mentioned in various ancient texts, such as the Kishkindha Kanda of Valmiki's *Ramayana* (Valmiki 427-428). In Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh, deodar trees are planted in the vicinity of temples. In India, Hindus regard nature as divine, a manifestation of God; hence, natural elements such as plants, animals, water, earth, and fire are integral to ceremonies and worship (Anthwal, Gupta and Sharma 966).

Traditionally, different sections of society have been assigned specific tasks related to the organisation of the festival. For the festival, the tallest deodar tree is brought to the temple's courtyard. The duty of bringing the deodar tree has been assigned to the *Nataans* of Gair village, the Scheduled Caste people of the village. They keep fast on the day of the festival, and after successfully bringing the deodar tree into the temple courtyard, they break their fast. It is ensured that the top of the tree does not break in the process of cutting and bringing the tree to the temple's courtyard. The people of Biyanli village, known as *Mancharaan*, belonging to the Scheduled Caste, collect the long, dry wooden pieces (*sillis*) from the forest. They tie these *sillis* around the deodar tree, making an odd number of circles, and each circle is made in the name of a particular deity (S. Rawat 73). Local dishes such as *aska*, *swale*, *chyuda*, and *seede* are prepared by people on this occasion. As per tradition, the *bajgis* (*dhol* players) visit people's houses, playing their *dhol*² and informing them about the festival (Kunwar and Panwar 310).

People start to gather at the courtyard of Raghunath ji's temple at Gair from about 12 AM in the midnight. The term '*mulk*' refers to the crowd attending the Mela. After midnight, people belonging to the *Sathi* and *Pansai thoks* are seen

carrying *ollas* (lit torches made of pine wood) towards the temple courtyard, as shown in **Fig. 2**. These *ollas* are first worshipped, and *pithain*³ is applied to them. People from *Sathi thok* reach the temple courtyard via Koti village, while those from *Pansai thok* come via Bakhreti village. As people from both the *thoks* pass through Koti and Bakhreti villages, the residents of these two villages welcome the crowd, accompanied by the sound of the *dhol*, and the arriving people are garlanded. This practice is called *olgana* in the local dialect (D. Rawat 151-152). Local politicians, including local Members of Legislative Assembly, also participate in the event. For these individuals, as members of the local community and being part of the same cultural environment, such festivals serve as significant opportunities to engage with residents and demonstrate their continued reverence for local deities and cultural traditions. In addition to politicians, dignitaries with significant roles in the administration or local entities also participate in the event (Thapliyal).

People reach Raghunath ji's temple at about 4 AM. Upon reaching, they first perform the *parikrama* (circumambulation of the temple), showing their respect and devotion to the deity. They sing these lines, calling other people to reach the temple courtyard to celebrate the Devlang (S. Rawat 73-74):

*Toriya ku tela re, toriya ku tela re
Amavsya ki rata ma Devalangi ku khela
Raja Raghunath le Devalangi ku khela
Chasi layo mattha le, chasi layo mattha
Gair ka mandir ma sabhi hoi jao kattha
Raja Raghunath le Devalangi ku khela*

The deodar tree is made to stand upright, and certain rituals are performed. Firstly, the *pujari* (priest) and *maali*⁴ of Raghunath ji and Danda Deota perform a ritual referred to as *chhimma tika*, praying for the well-being of the people. After this, the worship of Devlang, Raghunath ji, Madkeshawar Mahadev, Danda Deota, and Sangtaru Maharaja is performed. Thereafter, the *wajirs* of both *Sathi* and *Pansai thoks*, as well as the Nataan and Mancharaan families of Gair and Biyanli villages, respectively, receive the *pagadi pithain*. Now, people from both groups attempt to lift the Devlang with the help of wooden structures (*kainchi*) specially prepared to lift the Devlang. Since the temple of Raghunath ji at Gair falls under the *Sathi thok*, the people of *Sathi thok* stand on the side of the temple while lifting the Devlang, and those from the *Pansai thok* stand on the other side (S. Rawat 74). The tree is lifted up successfully and placed in the *okhali* (a pit-like

structure made in the temple courtyard). Should the Devlang fall or break at any point during the lifting process, a new deodar tree must be brought from the forest, and the procedure must be initiated anew. In 2022, as mentioned in a news report, an incident occurred when Devlang broke during the lifting process, resulting in injuries to several individuals. However, to ensure the ritual's proper completion, a new deodar tree was sourced from the forest and successfully positioned upright (Uttarkashi Mein Devlang Parv Ki Dhoom, Prasad Ke Roop Mein Di Jaati Hai Raakh).

As *wajirs* of Koti and Bakhreti give lit torches (*ollas*) to the people (*mulk*), this indicates that the formal permission has been given to set the Devlang on fire (D. Rawat, Rawain Kshetra Ke Lokdeota Evam Lokotsava 152). Folk songs and dances such as *Raso*⁵, *Tandi*⁶, and *Harul*⁷ are performed on this occasion (Kunwar and Panwar 310). People dance around the Devlang and sing these lines of a song (S. Rawat 74):

Sathiyo pasayo rata biyani, Masu ka olau ni rata biyani
Gair natan devlanga le gaye, biyali khabariya ni devalanga sajai
Sathiyo pasayo rata biyani, Masu ka olau ni rata biyani
Koti gava bakhareti, pithai pai, sathi pasayo ni aga lagai
Sathiyo pasayo rata biyani, Masu ka olau ni rata biyani
Khadi utho devalanga lagi tamasa, sagiya lagi tamasa meri diyani
Sathiyo pasayo rata biyani, Masu ka olau ni rata biyani
Raghunath pujeli, pithai lai, Dandu ki matriya tamasa ke ai
Sathiyo pasayo rata biyani, Masu ka olau ni rata biyani

Addressing both groups, *Sathi* and *Pansai*, it is said in these lines that the torches lit in the name of Mahasu *Deota* have ended the night. People of Gair and Biyali prepared the Devlang. Koti-Bakhreti villages have received the *pithain*, and the *tilak* (sacred forehead mark in Hindu traditions) has been applied to Raghunath ji, located at the Pujeli temple. To witness this, *Vandeviyan* (goddesses believed to be residing in the forests) are paying visits to the site (S. Rawat 74).

Similar to Diwali in the Kartika month, where the lighting of diya symbolises the victory of good over evil and light over darkness, here, too, the burning of Devlang represents the victory of good over evil and the triumph of light over darkness, as the light from the burning Devlang illuminates the surroundings. Ash that is left after burning the Devlang is applied as tika on their forehead by the people. Dancing and singing continue till sunrise after the

Devlang is lit, as shown in Figure 3. Afterwards, the Gaud Brahmins of Gadoli village light a mashal (torch) from the flame of the Devlang. This torch is then taken to the Madkeshwar temple, located two kilometres away from Gair village. Here at this temple, the wajirs of Koti-Bakhreti, along with the Gaud Brahmins, offer the purnahuti (final offering) of Devlang and perform the hawan (ritual fire ceremony), as well as worship. A Brahmin from the Gadoli village is the main priest here. Pure milk (waterless milk) and cow ghee (clarified butter) for the hawan are provided by the Chauhans of Gaul village. The Devlang festival is considered complete only after doing the *hawan* and worship at Madkeshwar temple (D. Rawat 117).



Fig. 2. Ollas, pieces of pine wood, are lit at night and carried by the people of Sathi and Pansai thoks as torches (mashal) to Raghunath ji's Temple. Photograph by Manisha Singh Rajput, 2024.



Fig. 3. Firing up the deodar tree: the sacred ritual of the Devlang Mela. Photograph by Manisha Singh Rajput, 2024.

Continuity and Change: Socio-Cultural Significance in the Age of Globalisation

The processes of globalisation, modernisation, and the migration of people from one region to another have always had an impact on local festivals, fairs, and all socio-cultural aspects and traditions associated with a particular festival. Historically, the Rawain, along with the Jaunsar-Bawar region of Garhwal, have been known for their relative inaccessibility and being disconnected from the rest of the world due to their geographical location. In the 1960s, while serving as a teacher in a school in Purola, then a village in Rawain, Prayag Joshi, in his book *Rawain Se Uttarakhand* (2009), refers to the limited road connectivity in the region during that period. The rapid expansion of the road network in the region over the past few decades has significantly impacted all facets of people's lives, including local festivals such as Devlang Mela (Joshi 1-4, 50-55). Currently,

villages in remote areas are also connected to main towns and cities, such as Naugaon, Barkot, Purola, Mori, and Uttarkashi.

Locals say that the Mela continues to attract a large number of people, and the availability of modern transportation has played a significant role in this. There is a motorable road from Barkot to Gail Banal now. People who have migrated to urban areas in search of employment opportunities or for education come to their villages for the Devlang. However, earlier, people would reach their villages in advance, as road connectivity was not good, and it would take longer to arrive at the destination. At present large number of people arrive on the same day to attend the fair and return as soon as the festivities conclude. In the past, people from both the *thoks*, *Sathi* and *Pansai* used to walk on foot, carrying the *ollas* to the courtyard of the Raghunath Temple at Gair Banal. Now that the road has been built up to the village itself, a large number of people come by travelling in their personal vehicles. Additionally, many people, instead of carrying burning *ollas*, now use their mobile phones' flashlights. In the past, groups of people walking towards the temple, carrying *ollas*, used to form a beautiful sight in the darkness of the night; now it has been reduced to a fraction of its former scale.

The availability of modern amenities, such as electricity, in the region has also affected the way Devlang is organised and experienced by the people now. The use of loudspeakers for making announcements, giving directions to people involved in various fair activities, and the use of modern lighting to decorate the temple and its courtyard, as well as to illuminate the surroundings, have become an essential part of the celebration now. The influence of mass media and popular culture has also been evident in recent times, as seen in the way people enjoy folk dances and songs at the fair. Earlier, when exposure to mass media and popular culture was almost negligible, people would sing folk songs accompanied by the playing of traditional musical instruments, such as the *dhol*, *damaun*⁸, and *ranasingha*⁹, throughout the entire night of the celebration. Songs recorded in studios, accompanied by the use of non-traditional musical instruments like the piano and guitar, and played on modern sound systems, constitute an important part of the celebration now. While traditional music and dance continue to be an essential part of all the festivities in the fair, it also displays elements influenced by contemporary trends. Songs that people of old generations knew and sang on special occasions are no longer known to the younger generation in the same manner in which they were etched in the memories of older generations. Many folk songs may be lost forever if not recorded and documented, as they have been passed down orally through

generations, and the chain of transmission is broken due to migration from villages to urban centres. The commercialisation of certain activities associated with the fair is also evident in present times, as professional singers are invited to perform on the occasion. An interplay between tradition and modernity is becoming a feature of many folk festivals and fairs in the Rawain region.

Despite the influence of several external factors, the Devlang Mela has retained its core rituals and festivities. Rituals around the invocation and worship of the Ragunath ji, the presiding deity of the temple, have been practised in their current form for generations. The participation of large numbers of people, dancing to local folk songs, signifies their active involvement and the enduring belief in the local deity's power. Historically, festive occasions like Devlang served as vital platforms for social interaction among the people. They served as occasions to reaffirm their social ties and reconnect with family and friends, as people from all the villages in the vicinity of the Gair Banal would gather for the occasion. Such occasions bring back to the village even those who have migrated to other towns and cities for various reasons. The state government of Uttarakhand has designated the Devlang fair as the state fair since 2016. This represents an intervention from the authorities to make local festivals known to the wider audience outside the region and the state as well. Such government initiatives to promote local culture and to showcase the unique traditions of the Rawain region show a shift in focus and perspective in modern times.

Conclusion

Amidst all the changes, the significance of local socio-cultural festivals, such as Devlang, remains profound for people living in geographically remote areas. In the midst of their challenging lives associated with agriculture and animal husbandry, individuals have found moments of joy and happiness by organising fairs and festivals. They continue to be important occasions of community gathering, fostering and reinforcing the social bonding among people. They play a crucial role in preserving the region's cultural heritage. Local fairs and festivals also encompass the historical context of past cultural traditions and significant events of the specific community observing them. The rise of contemporary entertainment options is diminishing people's interest in folk songs and folk dances to some extent. A significant number of local festivals have now ceased to exist, while others have managed to survive into modern times by adapting to the changes brought about by the rapid pace of modernisation and globalisation. It is in this context that the study of the Devlang Mela assumes significance.

Devlang Mela continues to be one of the most important festivals for the people of Rawain. It continues to showcase and preserve the region's socio-cultural and religious traditions. The Mela has demonstrated a significant level of continuity while also adapting well to the forces of globalisation and modernisation simultaneously. The core rituals of the Mela, ranging from the cutting of a deodar tree to its burning, the worship of the deity Raghunath ji, and all the associated rituals, have demonstrated a remarkable degree of continuity over time. This reflects the local communities' deep-rooted beliefs in traditional practices. However, the Mela has not remained static and has experienced several changes with time. Technological advancements, improved infrastructure, and the increasing availability of mobile networks and internet connectivity have all contributed significantly to enhancing the visibility and accessibility of the Mela in recent times. Rawain is no longer untouched by the forces of globalisation and modernisation as it once was until the late twentieth century. Analysing the continuity and changes observed in local festivals, such as Devlang, within their historical context is crucial for understanding the dynamic nature of folk traditions and their ability to adapt and evolve. It is their ability to connect the present with the past that makes them a relevant subject of study in the present time. As globalisation and modernisation spread to the relatively isolated parts of Uttarakhand, local festivals such as Devlang Mela continue to play a key role in the lives of people, giving them a cultural identity and a sense of belonging and togetherness. At present, the Devlang Mela continues to evolve over time, absorbing changes and transformations, while simultaneously striving to preserve its core rituals and traditions.

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Notes:

¹ The information is based on an oral interview with Dinesh Rawat of Koti village, conducted on June 6, 2025. He himself belongs to the *wajir* community and has worked extensively on the history and cultural traditions of the Rawain region.

² Double-sided drum. One of the most important instruments used in folk music. It is usually paired with another musical instrument called *damaun*. It is typically played on the occasion of weddings, festivals, or other auspicious events. During ritual performances, it is also used to invoke the deities.

³ It is usually prepared using the paste of ground, soaked rice, mixed with vermilion or water during socio-religious ceremonies.

⁴ The term refers to the oracles of the local gods. He acts as a medium through whom the deity communicates with the people.

⁵ Performed by the women while holding each other's hands. They arrange themselves in a semi-circle while dancing to the accompaniment of the *dhol* played by the *bajgi*.

⁶ The word literally translates to dancing while standing in a queue. However, while dancing, two semi-circle formations are made; only men perform it. Special attention is paid to the movement of the feet while dancing to songs, which can be religious or love songs in terms of their theme.

⁷ They are songs based on real-life incidents. They are descriptive in nature, recounting the valour and courageous deeds done by an individual.

⁸ It is a small metallic drum, characterised by a flat and circular form. Similar to the *dhol*, it is played with sticks and paired with the *dhol*. *Dhol* and *damaun* complement one another.

⁹ It is an S-shaped trumpet, constructed from brass or copper, used during religious ceremonies. In the past, it was used during royal processions or for making proclamations.

Cults, Customs and Cuisines: A Study of Food Offerings in South Indian Temples

Sourav Sen

Abstract

This essay examines the cultural, ritual, and symbolic dimensions of food offerings (naivedyam) in South Indian temples, situating them within broader anthropological and historical frameworks of food as a semiotic and social system. Drawing on textual sources, ethnographic observations, and regional comparisons across Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh, the study explores how culinary practices mediate relationships between devotees and deities, while simultaneously encoding hierarchies of caste, purity, economy, and regional identity. The analysis demonstrates that temple food offerings cannot be reduced to a single explanatory logic; rather, they emerge from the interplay of written Agamic prescriptions, oral traditions, ecological availability, economic capacity, and ritual considerations of purity and preservation. The essay traces historical transformations in temple cuisine, including processes of Sanskritisation that have reconfigured earlier practices involving meat, alcohol, and other now-excluded substances. At the same time, it highlights the persistence of localised and caste-specific traditions, revealing tensions between orthodox Brahmanical norms and subaltern ritual expressions. Particular attention is given to the ways in which food offerings reflect the perceived nature, mythology, and social origins of deities, as well as the symbolic properties attributed to different ingredients. The study further interprets naivedyam as a form of ritual language through which devotees communicate devotion, negotiate divine favour, and articulate social belonging. By foregrounding both pragmatic and symbolic determinants—ranging from agricultural cycles and culinary technologies to cosmological beliefs—the essay argues that temple food practices constitute a complex cultural system where material, social, and metaphysical dimensions converge. Ultimately, the paper positions South Indian temple cuisine as a dynamic field of meaning, shaped by historical change yet deeply embedded in enduring structures of ritual, identity, and belief.

Keywords: Food offerings, Naivedyam, Ritual, Temple, South India

Introduction

Humans produce an unusually significant semiotic system when they transform a portion of their surroundings into food. Food in its physical and material forms assumes and reifies technological structures, production and trade connections, field and marketplace circumstances, and the facts of abundance and poverty. Therefore, it is a social reality that is extremely compact. Moreover, it is a well adaptive kind of collective representation, at least in numerous human communities. Levi-Strauss argued that even the most basic human foods convey deep cosmological notions (Counihan and Esterik 38). Ability of food to convey social signals is enhanced by the development of gastronomy and its socio-economic scenario. Numerous anthropologists have demonstrated how food, in its different forms, settings, and purposes, can convey closeness or distance, cohesion even society as a whole belonging or isolation, and hierarchy and competitiveness (Firth 251; Geertz 360; Ortner 129; Strathern 23; Young 146-206). There are two differences between them: either anthropologist have tried to identify the function of food in social organisation by following the examples of Richards (Richards 162-211 & Richards 289) and Malinowski (Malinowski 65), or they have tried to comprehend food as a system of culture, a system of symbols, categories, and meanings, following the later lead of Levi-Strauss (Levi-Strauss 93).

Serving meals to family members or guests is as natural to a South Indian as providing food to the deities. The basic connection between humans and the deities is believed to be this matter. Both men and deities contribute to the production of food; one does so via labour and technology (the necessary requirements), while the other does so through rainfall and a favourable natural environment (the adequate conditions). The divine beings are fed and their leftovers (*prasadam*) are eaten by devotees to ensure this collaboration (Appadurai 494-511). There would be no issue worth researching if *naivedyam* (meals provided to the deities) was limited to offering a small portion of one's regular food (**Fig. 1 & 2**). However, *naivedyam* is not such a straightforward matter, and the offering of a devotee's regular food only makes up a minimal portion of food offerings, which can vary depending on the receiving the deity the offer, the location and event of the offering, etc. An effort was made to gather myths and legends that explain food offers, but only a small number of them are up to date, and only a small number of informants had more or less creative ideas. The concepts and principles of the great Indian tradition were

typically reflected in these facts. Though shifting socio-political structure of pre modern South Indian civilisation was most likely significantly correlated with changes in the divine meals of the main temples (Breckenridge).



Fig. 1. Cleaning the sacred place before offerings *naivedyam* to the deity



Fig. 2. Food is being offered to the deity.

Food Offerings in Temples

The temple is a very different setting for food offerings than the home and wedding ceremony because there, individuals and communities are bound together primarily by their shared devotion to a single, all-powerful deity rather than by kinship or affection. A wide range of families, castes, and other charitable groups collaborate to plan intricate and frequently magnificent public festivals on an everyday, weekly, monthly, and annual basis. The South Indian temple is a culture where every action related to the deity, either through efforts or gifts are considered as favours (*urimai*) and are perceived to generate reward in terms of honours (*mariyatai*). This is because the presiding deities in every temple are treated as kings and queens (Appadurai 494-511) (**Fig. 3 & 4**). Concrete manifestations of honour include the deity's clothing, water that the deity drinks or uses, and most importantly, the meal that is thought to have been consumed by the deity, which is known as *prasadam*. Most of the followers cited tradition when asked why they offered particular dishes to a divine character. Some confirmed that they provided the gods with what they liked and that the *risi*s (the sage) were told to do so. They served to the deities what they possessed and what they enjoyed eating, according to a few other unremarkable informants. Several of these statements include some truth. The decision about the type of offerings is unquestionably based on tradition rather than personal desire; the devotee will naturally provide the items he/she hopes the deity will like, and accessibility and

individual tastes will also play a role (**Fig. 5 & 6**). Given the large number of gods who receive *naivedyam*, the numerous occasions on which it is offered, and the even greater number of food varieties available, it is evident that this intricate web of rituals cannot be attributed to a single causative agent; rather, a variety of factors must influence the choice of food.



Fig. 3. Cleaning the sacred place before offerings *naivedyam* to the deity



Fig. 4. Milk is offering to *Nandi*

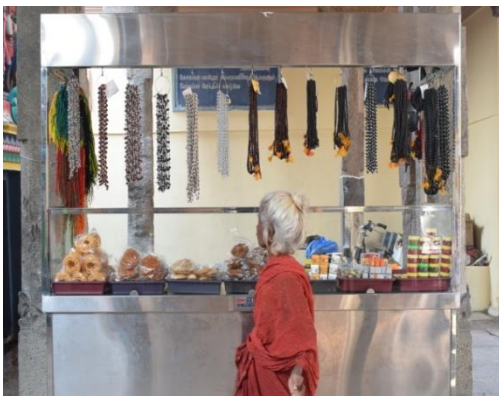


Fig. 5. Various foods for offering to the deities in South India



Fig. 6. Selling coconuts for the deity, Tamil Nadu

Objectives of the Study

The present paper makes an effort to explain the interpretation behind food offers, beginning with the pseudonymous concept of tradition, then briefly outlining the more evident and tangible justifications, and concluding with suggestions for cultural and psychological causes. In this paper it is examined how oral tradition-based regional conventions affect the food habits of the

immigrants as well as the eating habits of their deities in South India. Although geographically and culturally it is a huge area, in the concluding part has been focused on similarities and dissimilarities of food offerings among the four states of South India, namely Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh.

Let us make an initial focus that the selection of meals supplied is typically unaffected by the reasons for presenting them, which can range from the manifestation of natural devotion to dealing for the satisfaction of a specific need. A variety of conventional donations that are differentiated by their commercial worth may occasionally be available for the devotee to select from. A person is more inclined to make a more costly offering (not just food) if he/she is more devoted or seeks to gain favour (**Fig. 7**). While a priest was performing *homam*, *ghee* (*ney*) was put in the fire to console Visnu, but as an additional intent, jaggery *payasam*, a sweet rice dessert, was provided as well in the fire to fulfill a request. The dish of *payasam*, which could seem like the more ostentatious offering, was deemed to be the simplest since *ghee* without mixing would be more powerful than *ghee* mixed in *payasam*. Now we are going to discuss the various elements that appear to influence the option of cuisine served to the deities.

Although this practice is often overlooked in the scholarly study of Common Era temple activities, Charles Malamoud's '*Cooking the World*' (Malamoud 26-27) emphasises all *Vedic* ceremonial tributes as food offerings to the deities, proving the primacy of food offering in South Asian religious practice. Early Hindu iconic god worship may have been influenced by the many ways of making tangible offerings that were used in early Buddhist worship as symbols of respect (Gutiérrez 187). It is clear that, starting in antiquity, compassion in Brahmanical communities frequently took the form of honouring, which invariably involved the provision of food, etc. The manuscripts frequently use the variation *bhojayet*, which means 'he should feed', for *pujayet*, which means 'he should honour', reflecting the relationship between *puja* and feeding (Olivelle 259). The crystallisation of *Agamic* instructions for religious practices in the synthesis or composition of the *Paramesvara Samhita* in the twelfth to thirteenth centuries makes the growth of *puja* worship, including extravagant food offerings, throughout the medieval period all the more evident.

Custom

a. Written Tradition

Tradition was cited as the primary justification for the provision of particular foods. Naturally, this is merely a hypothetical explanation because the people who instituted the practice probably had valid reasons for doing so rather than acting at random. Despite the fact that using tradition only pushes the issue more into historical context, it is still worth discussing separately. Temple menus continue to feature a variety of flavoured rice, which make up the majority of the *Agamic* offerings. Substandard cereals include barley and other millets that are discontinued in usage are the primary sources of variations in the perception of a decline. Furthermore, items from the jungle such as bamboo seeds and mango buds a common indigenous food have been stopped from the set of gifts and food offerings. Even while honey is still valued and used as a key ingredient in *abhisekam* (the bathing of the deity), honey-rice is no longer served. The bottle gourd represents the most fascinating contrast between the past and contemporary uses of agricultural products in the foods of deities. In addition to the fact that Brahmin families often do not consume gourds, let alone provide them, the ancient texts frequently declared that it was illegal to offer bottle gourd foods in most of the temples. Given that the gourd serves as the container in which the toddy-drawer stores tree sap, the present-day avoidance of the vegetable may be the result of a link with alcohol and lower castes (Ferro-Luzzi 529-556). Nothing illicit could be found in the gourd during the *Agamic* period, when the goddess Lalita used to be passionate of drinking. The food that gods and goddesses consumed in *Agamic* times – blood, flesh, and fish has now been completely eliminated from ‘sanskritised’ temple menus. The ritual offering of pickles is an additional instance of the gods’ less concerns in earlier times. There are references to pickles in both Saiva and Vaisnava scriptures (Ferro-Luzzi 529-556). Nevertheless, both of these groups are no longer providing pickles as food offerings to the god.

Certain *Agamic* offerings are difficult to identify, such as *divyanna* (holy rice), which was made by combining rice with milk, *ghee*, and bananas; as a result, it would not have an identical equivalent today. However, it is also possible that the *Agamic* providing is equivalent to *tirusatham*, or ‘god’s rice’, a pleasantly sweet rice dish served at the Varadaraja temple in Kanchipuram. The words ‘*modaka*’ and ‘*appam*’, which refer to sweet rice pancakes, actually relate to the identical desserts as in early centuries, even though they are still listed in

the *Agamas* as ritual delicacies (**Fig. 8**). It is impossible to derive each of the various sweets and savory foods from sacred writings. The slicing of coconuts and presenting offerings of tamarind rice are the two most significant additions to current temple rituals. Out of all the sacred writings described, the *Kumaratantra* is the only one where the coconut is depicted as both coconut water and coconut gratings in a dry, spicy mixture. Coconut splitting, which is a frequent practice in all sites of devotion from large ‘sanskritised’ temples to rural places of worship and intimate *pūja* halls is most likely a poor custom that has been elevated. Tamarind rice was first used in temple food preparation, possibly as a result of the growing commercial activity in consecrated food, which favoured foods that could be preserved.



Fig. 7. Dairy products for offerings to the deity in Tamil Nadu



Fig. 8. Modaka and other fruit items are offered to the deity. (Courtesy – Samita Dey)

b. Oral Tradition

Most of the foods that are currently served must be oral traditions. This tradition’s scope of validity is distinct from one family to entire areas, frequently aligning with the boundaries of linguistic states and occasionally even uniting many states together. The Nambutiri Brahmins’ strong position in Keralan spirituality may also be to blame for some of the ritual’s peculiarities. It is possible that certain significant local contributions were first made by a powerful individual and continued for generations. The Padmanabhaswami temple in Trivandrum is reported to have special offerings that are the responsibility of the Raja of Trivandrum, whose kingdom is situated on the boundary of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Given that the salty foods served in this large Vaisnava temple differ from what is customary across the other parts of the state and suggest a connection to Tamil Nadu, this is highly probable. It is common for other temples to attribute their specific gifts to religious reformers and saints.

In Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh states, other castes, as well as Brahmins and non-Brahmins in Tamil Nadu, offered the delicious dish to the gods. In some places, various divinities may have diverse favorites when it comes to the identical food. In Tamil Nadu, an *appam* is a delicious rice flour cake that is typically served to any deity. In Kerala, it is Ganapati's favorite dessert, and in Andhra Pradesh, Hanuman must be offered a wheat-based version of the same dish. A sweet flat rice cake called *athirasam* is a common offering in Tamil Nadu with no particular meaning, but in Karnataka, its equivalent, *kajjaya*, was only used by Brahmins to revere their ancestors, and non-Brahmins preferred to offer it to the demon Narakasura at *Dipawali*.

Availability

While availability certainly influences what is supplied, it primarily serves as a deterrent by keeping out goods that are difficult to find. There must be additional considerations because there are far more foods available than are provided. The tributes naturally take into account local crops and the monetary significance of particular delicacies. A major component of *naivedyam* is rice, an essential food in South India. Although plain steamed rice is the primary food of South Indian cuisine, no one would consider consuming it by itself without combining it with different pulses and vegetables to offer flavour and additional nutrients. However, in addition to the typical South Indian rice and curry feast and several varieties of flavouring rice, the gods are frequently given plain rice itself, known as *annanaivedyam* or *mahanaivedyam*. Both 'food' and 'rice' are simultaneously implied by the Sanskrit word '*anna*', which is frequently engaged in ceremony. While rice remains a staple in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, wheat recipes are also served within households and at temples. The data undoubtedly illustrates how wheat is more readily available in the arid Deccan states. Coconuts and bananas were likely the traditional offerings provided by each follower who entered a temple because they were available throughout the year. Bananas grow in the humid climate of Kerala and are much more significant commercially there compared to the other southern Indian states.

The two most significant seasonal crops of South India that are offered are sugarcane and rice. The sun god Surya and the other gods in the *puja* chamber are offered fresh rice and sugarcane during *Pongal*, the harvest festival of Tamil Nadu (**Fig. 9**). All natives of Tamil Nadu who are probed on this day make spicy *Venpongal* (with pulse added) and jaggery *Pongal*. Sugarcane stems are placed in the *puja* room, and the *Pongal* is primarily prepared in the courtyard, essentially

beneath the sun. The three various types of meals that most clearly demonstrate the *ayurvedic* medical guideline that cooling foods should be consumed during the summer months are unprocessed soaking and seasoned green grams, occasionally combined with cucumber, jaggery water and diluted buttermilk sprinkled with curry leaves. Appropriate diets can also help mitigate the impacts of the winter season. In Tamil Nadu, the month of *Markali* (December/January) is devoted to either lord Visnu or the Vaisnava saint Andal. In order to keep Andal and her followers warm throughout this holy month, *puja* is performed at four in the morning, and Andal is served hot pepper rice at that time.

Monetary Potential Opportunities

A certain amount of what is given is illustrated by economic considerations, but they merely choose from an initial selection of meals and are not in charge of coming up with any original solutions. The temple's level of riches has a significant impact on how many *naivedyam* during the time of *pujas* are dedicated there, how many side dishes are made for the gods' food, and how much *ghee* is used. Modest temples will merely select fewer and less expensive dishes from the normally recommended menu, but they will not provide anything entirely different from their wealthier counterparts devoted to the specific deity. However, in order to satisfy the deities, the followers are also prepared to spend a lot of money. For example, despite the recent increase in coconut prices, coconuts were still being offered in all of the temples (**Fig. 10**).



Fig. 9. *Nandi* adorned with fruits and vegetables, in *Mattu Pongal*, Thanjavur. (Courtesy – Dinesh Kathirvelan)



Fig. 10. Preparing holy offerings for ritual

Easy to Made

Many of the intricate delicacies that are presented to the idols in South India take many hours to prepare. Indian cuisine also has a lot of dry combinations that can be made quickly, which is advantageous for the cook. Dry Bengal gram (pulse), puffed rice, and flattened rice are the most popular of these premade products. These can be served plain or in a variety of ways, such as with fried sesame seeds, coconut gratings, or other sweet or spicy ingredients. All four of the South Indian states have these dry combinations, although the West Coast focuses a particular emphasis on them. It just requires a few minutes to form previously cooked rice, lentils, and sesame grains into balls with an addition of jaggery syrup. Many different kinds of jaggery balls are presented to multiple deities and used on numerous occasions. During the Tamil month of *Karttikai* (November/December), however, Murukan's celebration requires the consumption of *Karttikai pori*, a sweet puffed rice ball.

Even though it may appear possibly basic, knowing how to preserve food is a crucial factor in selecting what to serve. It has everything to do with purity issues, which are among the most important aspects to be covered here. Boiling rice in the Indian summer heat quickly turns expired and, thus, it becomes unhygienic. Consecrated food is sold throughout the time as the temple is open, and *naivedyam* is provided multiple times a day at the larger temples. Devotees can also contribute cash for *puja* and get *prasadam* in exchange. As a result, providing foods that do not spoil easily is really desirable. Temples hardly ever sell plain boiled rice, presumably because it spoils so quickly. However, all other varieties of boiling rice with flavour, such as tamarind rice, lime rice, turmeric rice, pepper rice, and so on, have the ability to preserve for a longer period of time. With the addition of tamarind juice and oil, tamarind rice can even be stored for a few days.

Origin of Gods and Cults

The type of food served could reveal details about the god's or its cult's origins. The predominant religion of Tamil Nadu is Saivism, and Siva is closely linked to the region's main grain, rice, especially when it comes to plain rice in its purest, unadulterated form. No offering of wheat-based goods can be found in any large Saiva temple. However, *roti*, a wheat-based food, is served in Srirangam and Alakar *koyil*, two of the state's most important Vaisnava temples.

The most well-known example of food offerings that reveal the origin of the god is Murukan's favourite dish, *tinaimavu*, which is a millet cereal that is consumed with honey (Ferro Luzi 540). The hill tracts known as *kurinji*, among the five historical regions (*tinai*) in classic Tamil literature, are the typical source of both honey and millet. A specific divine being rules every single of these distinct geographical regions, and they are all linked to unique flora. Depending on the origins of the priests and cultural customs of the temple, the same deity in the same location may also receive various offerings.

The original followers of deity may occasionally be identified by the food selection. There are several *naivedyam* traditions that may also be caste based. In addition to serving as a geographical marker, the millet cereal with honey mentioned above is also an indication of Murukan's tribe ancestry. The typical tribal space is situated on the mountain tracts of South India, and Murukan's second wife, Valli, was a Korava tribal girl. According to different individuals, Valli used to make *tinaimavu* for Murukan, therefore he is offered it. It appears that Aiyappan is a tribal deity who has been associated with illustrious culture of Kerala through an equally incredible narrative. Baking Aiyappan's favourite sweet *aiya* on a plantain leaf is a method that may have originated in the forest. Additionally, the practice of gifting him broken coconuts shows an ancient background too. Aiyappan's tribal ancestry can also be deduced from his dislike of women and the absence of caste differentiation in his religion, in addition to his food habits. It is reminiscent of the exclusion of indigenous *Toda* and *Kota* women from their ritualistic activities of societies that no woman of puberty or menstruation period is allowed to enter Sabarimala. In Tamil Nadu, the traditional dish on *Tiruvāthirai* day is *kaḷi*, sweet rice porridge. Even Brahmins make the dish in this instance, but they do not regard it as their cuisine. According to certain source individuals, *kali* is intended for Siva, the cosmic dancer, and the Tiruvathirai ceremony is held on an extensive level in the Nataraja temple in Chidambaram.

A non-Brahmin woman attempted to make a link between this temple's Nandanar tale and the rice porridge contribution. Despite being a devoted follower of Nataraja, Nandanar could not enter the temple due to his lower caste; therefore, he was unable to see the chief deity of the temple from the main entrance gate because Siva's vehicle, Nandi, blocked his view of the temple. Yet, his determined devotion, the bull Nandi once shifted around to allow Nandanar to see the idol. The people believed that on the festival day of Siva, the regular meal of Nandanar was served to him in remembrance of this miracle. Even this

discrimination had been seen during the time of distribution of *prasadam* also (Tartakov 47-48). From 1944 to 1968 C.E., some non-Brahmin organisations and individuals voiced their opposition to specific temple customs, initially through letters and petitions to the temple officials and later through a quasi-legal complaint before the Department of Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments (HR & CE) for administration. Arjun Appadurai gave instance that the correct distribution of *prasadam* in worship was at the center of a complicated political conflict that occurred in the 1940s and 1950s at the Sri Parthasarathi Swami Temple, a Vaisnava sanctuary in Madras city. A group of non-Brahmin worshippers who were comparatively poor and marginalised established the movement. They asserted that the way and setting of the allocation of *prasadam* to the assembly was a systematic humiliation and a purposeful exclusion from the neighbourhood (*goshthi*) of worshippers. They cited the fact that the priests provided them the holy foods that remain in various vessels than those chosen for the Brahmin worshippers; that the Brahmins sat down when the non-Brahmins received the sacred food, while they stood when the Brahmin worshippers received *prasadam*; and that, generally speaking, the holy meal was thrown at them, in their own terms, as if they were considered dogs and cattle (Appadurai 507). Nonetheless, it is crucial to realise that the culinary degradation these non-Brahmins endured was a visible representation of a greater effort to deny them their legitimate place in the deity's worship. They seek respect, decency, and the regard that was rightfully theirs as worshippers, not priority, that should have been a very radical demand. Their grievances were based on the egalitarian heritage of South Indian ritualism, which expressly opposes the kind of caste-based rigidity that dominates every aspect of South Indian life.

Cleanliness and Contamination

The deities in the Indian religion are arranged in a hierarchy similar to that of Indian society, and many objects that would not be allowed by certain deities due to their lack of purity may still be given to others. The blood sacrifice, which is despised by the Brahmanical deities but sought by village deities, is the most well-known example to date. Plain rice is frequently served in temples and homes due to the purifying qualities of *ghee*, one of the cow's traditional sacred milk products. When prepared boiled with ritual purity rice is extraordinarily susceptible to contamination yet is also pure. Some small amounts of *ghee* are

therefore poured on it when it is offered to the deities as a precaution; this process is known as '*annasuddhi*' (the purification process of rice).

Given that eating *prasada* after a temple visit is now widely customary, it may be surprising that food offerings have not always been enjoyed as temple *prasada* after the ritual. In fact, for some temple visitors, finding the various, always delectable *prasadas* that are frequently offered for free in contemporary temples is practically a common feature. Not only does the ingestion of *naivedya* by a human devotee not constitute a part of the *puja* ceremony, but the 'waste' products of a practice are really intended to be treated as 'special' items, even if the leftover food is not deemed impure or *ucchista*. Both *nirmalya*, garlands already embraced by a deity in a *puja*, and *naivedya*, the food that remains after being offered as *naivedya*, are frequently (though not always) specified as not to be tried again.

Nature of Foods and Deities

There is a propensity to choose foods that are compatible with the characteristics of Hindu deities, who vary significantly in appearance and personality. The same god's *naivedyam* could be distinct based on his many attributes and affiliations. A food's form, appearance, regularity, supplying power, refreshing and energising impacts, and other visible and intrinsic features all contribute to its character (**Fig. 11**). Argumentation based on suggests that some of these attributes may have an impact on the eater's mental and physical health. There are various ways that the connection between food and god might develop. Given their mythological associations with the god or, more frequently, the metaphorical equating of the *naivedyam* with the deity's personality, several foods may be believed to appease him/her (**Fig. 12**).



Fig. 11. Seasonal fruits offering with flowers for the deity Visnu



Fig. 12. Offering coconut to lord Vinayaka

As discussed here, the divinities will be described in a general sequence determined by their nature, the sort of food provided, and the association that is in charge of the offering, rather than by hierarchy and religious affiliation. There is not a specific *naivedyam* that reflects the personalities of the supreme lords Siva and Visnu in their most popular forms. Such a relationship occurs more in the relative number of their offerings than in their actual quantity. Besides having been a great erotic, Siva is also a great ascetic and has many terrifying qualities, while Visnu is completely benevolent. Siva's ascetic meal of simple boiled rice without any flavour may be seen as consistent with his austerity, whereas the gregarious Visnu is a glutton and relishes the provision of frequent and copious meals.

In Tamil Nadu, the offering of roasted spicy gram (*sundal*) is an essential component of the *Navaratri* celebration, which honours the three divine beings namely Durga, Lakshmi, and Sarasvati. This dish is regarded as an energy food and is most likely one of the products the goddesses favour for strengthening. The fact that Mahisasuramardini, the slayer of buffalo-demon, is the first of the three may support a belief in this regard. The sacrifices made by the snake undoubtedly imply a symbolic association with this typical nature of deity. In India, snakes are revered everywhere. The snake, a phallic symbol, is associated with reproduction and is invoked to take away infertility. Moreover, it is a representation of health and life in general, maybe as a result of its ability to remove its skin and reappear like a newborn. Milk and eggs are the primary offerings for snakes, primarily because they are associated with fertility and life (**Fig. 13**). The former is the child's first nourishment and is by definition the food that gives life, while the latter is prioritises of life energies. It is interesting to note that, whereas the practice of feeding milk to serpents is widespread throughout India and numerous other regions of the earth, the practice of offering eggs to snakes appears to be limited to specific areas of South India. The snake could have an affiliation with other deities or be a divinity in and of it. Whether eggs are presented or not depends on its priests are Brahmins or non-Brahmins. Milk can be offered to snakes in a variety of ways, such as by pouring it into an ant-hill, putting it in a vessel as *naivedyam*, or *abhisekam* with snake stones. Whole or broken raw eggs are positioned close to the purported place of snake.

Demons are renowned for their aggression and lack of self-control. Meat and liquor are considered by Indians to be the foods that best complement their nature. Actually, even after their masters, who are mostly goddesses, have stopped eating this kind of food, demonic gods and warlike guardians are the last

to do so. The tributes sent to the dead also make clear the connection between black sesame and unfortunate circumstances. During *sraddha*, the funeral rites of Brahmins and other upper castes, rice combined with black sesame cereals usually formed into balls (*pindant* or *pindadana*), is presented. *Tarpana*, an offering to the predecessors, is made up of water showered upon black sesame grains. Sesame can also be offered to other deities and used in auspicious ceremonies, but it is important to remove the skin so that the grain turns white or select a white type. Only in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh did Brahmins believe that black gram *vadai*, a flat, spicy cake with a central hole, was unfortunate and should only be offered to the dead.

Flavour, burning sensation, and other interior characteristics appear to define the nature of some of the foods supplied. Many of the lime fruit's ceremonial applications are likely due to its acidity. Lime is put at the feet of the irascible goddess, and it is refreshing properties enhanced to the reducing of aggression. Sometimes a devotee will present her with a complete garland of limes if the devotee feels that she (deity) is particularly suffering from her bad temper. The *Vedic* priests used a variety of techniques to 'sanskritised' the folk divinities. Despite the fact that the *Vedic* and folk traditions differ in many ways, they wish to include these gods in their range. However, these modifications have only been done to the well-known deities. The *Vedic* ceremonies, for instance, have a significant impact on Mariamman, a deity of the local lower-class populace. The deity actually had a horrible exposure and is covered in skulls. But more lately, the lemon garland has taken the place of the skull garland. She has changed her horrific appearance to a pleasing one. Occasionally, the folk deities were degraded as a result of these reorganisation activities. Simultaneously, they questioned the divine nature of the folk deities while emphasising the holy nature of those who were part of *Vedic* culture. They have either compared the deities of folklore to the gods of *Vedic* traditions or they have associated these gods with infectious illnesses (Xavier 623).

Food Offerings Ritual as Language

Although food does not seem to apply itself well to fundamental and linguistic evaluation, Levi-Strauss has demonstrated that it is one of the themes in both northern and southern American narratives (Ferro-Luzzi 507-514). Since the practice of presenting food enables the devotee to communicate with the gods, it appears acceptable to refer to the *naivedyam* ceremony as a language, with each individual offering being equivalent to a word (Ferro-Luzzi 507-514). Offerings

of food can be made to a deity as a sign of affection and devotion, or they might be made to barter, express gratitude for a blessing, or please the deity. However, not every divinity can be recognised by their food, and only a select handful have particular dietary preferences, such as the millet cereal with honey preserved for the Tamil deity Murukan or the eggs that are only consumable to snake god. It is clear that the *naivedyam* rite must involve some sort of language because the devotee interacts with the divine beings through food offerings, just like in ‘prayer’. Similar to how names indicate certain gods and festivals, offerings of food also emphasise the contrast among connects of gods and religious events, identical to language’s binary categories do. Given that redundancy is psychologically required for the understanding of not only language but also music and various semiological frameworks, the use of protection in such food combinations to emphasise the significance of an offering will appear pure to anyone who acknowledges the legitimacy of a semiological method of conducting ritual (Ferro-Luzzi 513) **(Fig. 14)**.



Fig. 13. Untensils for keeping food at one of the South Indian Temples



Fig. 14. Devotee brings food and other ritual items for devotion

Inscriptions indicate that temple employees occasionally received a share of the culinary oblations. This is more or less consistent with Jaimini’s *Mimamsa* interpretation, which holds that because the patron is also associated with the ritual, he/she too consumes the offering alongside the priests. As a result, temple employees, such as temple priests today may and frequently do receive a take or ‘portion’ (or ‘*bhakti*’ in the true sense of the word) in connection with the procedure. This approach is still used today, for instance at the Kamakshi Amman Koyil in Kanchipuram, where a portion of the *naivedya* is given to the priest and his family after it has been presented, while another portion is given to the patron or contributor. A few medieval inscriptions describe devotees giving

food offerings to the divinity, particularly during ceremonies. There are also a few examples of the deity's food being offered to first timers, or newcomers to temple locations, who are probably pilgrims (Gutiérrez 270). During the Chola period, the frequency of inscriptions expressing that people receive food after presenting it to a deity increases dramatically, with the thirteenth century having the highest number of references (Gutiérrez 189). It should be noted that these inscriptions do not employ the term *prasada* for the purpose of sanctified food; instead, they only occasionally use the term *naivedya* when referring to the food offered to the temple's divinity.

Summary and Observations

The most evident illustration of the distinction between sacred and profane is found in Brahminical ceremonial norms, where participation in spiritual acts is contingent upon ceremonial cleanliness. Brahmins maintain high standards of purity, such as food restrictions, ceremonial bathing, and avoiding physical contact with lower castes, in order to preserve their sacred status, according to ethnographic studies on temple priests in Tamil Nadu. These traditions support Dumont's assertion that lower castes are associated with pollution whereas Brahmins, the highest caste, are responsible for maintaining ceremonial cleanliness. Only ritually clean individuals are permitted to perform holy rituals during temple worship, highlighting the hierarchical ordering of religious duties that depends on purity and pollution. The sacred-profane and auspicious-inauspicious classifications employed in Indian society have been profoundly altered by contemporary culture, globalisation, urbanisation, scientific advancements, and legal interventions. Despite their continued dominance in social and religious life, these traditional paradigms have become less rigid in response to modern requirements. Caste-based systems have been altered by modernism and globalisation, which have introduced rationalist concepts.

The varied custom of offering fish, meat, and even toddy to the divinities may be seen in Keralan temples. The Muthappan temple at Parassinikadavu, Kuttichathan temple at Kalleri, Bhadrakali temple at Vellayani, Mandaikadu Bhagavathi temple near Colachel in Kanyakumari district, Avanangattil Kalari at Thrissur, and Melamcode Amman temple at Kumara *koyil* are a few of the well-known temples in Kerala that adhere to this tradition. Fish, meat, and drink are among the offerings made in these temples. The fact that none of these temples are administered by Brahmin priests unites them all. Here, males from lower classes worship the gods and do their *pujas*. Legends and myths are used to

justify such a departure from the norm. There is no substantial evidence to support the same. However, there is no denying the connection between the caste system and the variations in eating habits. Sree Muthappan, the god of Parassinikadavu in the Kannur district, is thought to be a hunter-like incarnation of Siva. It is evident from Muthappan's stories that he was born into a tribe. The Thiya community leads the *pujas*. Muthappan is traditionally offered fish, meat, and toddy. The Padmanabhaswami temple in Thiruvanthapuram, Kerala, has a unique avial made with fresh coconut, traditional veggatables, and coconut oil without the usage of mustard seeds. The *unni-appam*, which are spongy brown fried pieces composed of a mixture of rice flour, banana, jackfruit, and jaggery, can be found in Ganesha temples.

The sociological significance of sacred celebrations is highlighted by renowned sociologist M.N. Srinivas, who claims that they are significant social institutions that promote unity and a sense of shared identity. Festivals, according to Srinivas, give people a chance to emphasize their cultural affiliations and deepen relationships with the community, promoting social cohesiveness and integration (Srinivas 129). Furthermore, R.S. Sharma emphasises the significance of festivals in sustaining continuity in the face of social change by highlighting their function in conserving and passing down cultural heritage to future generations.

By examining the theological, mythical, and ritual aspects of festival foods, religious studies researcher Vasudha Narayanan provides views on their symbolic value (Narayanan 39-70). According to Narayanan, food offerings during festivals have deep symbolic significance that reflects moral principles, spiritual goals, and religious cosmologies. In order to shed insight on the transformational effect of festival foods in religious practice, Narayanan investigates their ritualised eating as activities of worship, solidarity, and purification using textual sources and ethnographic data. During holy days, food offerings and consumption have profound spiritual and cultural significance. Purity, auspiciousness, and divine benefits are symbolised by ingredients like saffron, cardamom, and rose water, which are often added to enhance the flavour and smell of celebratory foods. Religious festivals, which commemorate holy times of the year connected to offerings to deities and collective eating, can align with particular culinary customs. For example, the *Pongal* harvest festival during the month of January in South India is a lavish feast consisting of cultivated paddy prepared with pulses in three different dishes: *Ven Pongal* (savoury), *Shakkarai Pongal* (sweet), and *Akkara Vadashal* (milk). These meals are first

offered to tutelary deities and then eaten as consecrated food, accompanied by a stew made of nine different types of winter vegetables and beans. Thousands of devotees receive complimentary seasonal meals from the well-known Krishna temple in the southern Indian town of Udupi, Karnataka. In a similar way, several temples are well-known for both their large meals with regionally produced items and their local sweets or savouries. Additionally, sharing meals with family, friends, and neighbours strengthens religious principles of charity and compassion by fostering a sense of community and solidarity.

The culmination of numerous Tamil ceremonies, particularly in rural regions, is the sacrifice of animals, generally goats, chickens and sometimes even buffaloes today. The cosmological and cultural impact of such sacrifices is enormous (Berti and Good [eds.] 2024:3). If affluence and social structure are to be carried out correctly on the opulent scale required to appease the extremely meticulous village goddesses, they must first be established. Consequently, maintaining order and abundance in the forthcoming period depends on the goddesses being satisfied. Moreover, the health, fertility, and well-being of the neighbourhood communities are bestowed or prevented by these deities. As a result, the implications are extremely high, and there is a noticeable sense of relief after the event is successfully finished as well as anticipation throughout, should anything enrage or disgust the goddess. The majority of dishes in the temples of Tamil Nadu are made from rice-oriented ingredients (i.e., *idli*, *dosai*, etc.) because of the state's extensive paddy production. However, temple cuisine of Andhra Pradesh is associated with spice because chili is used extensively.

On numerous occasions, a wide variety of meals are offered to various deities. There is sometimes differentiation in food offerings at village shrines based on the receiving deity. The main difference that does arise is the contrast between blood-drinking gods and vegetarian deities; nonetheless, the most varied gods and goddesses perhaps found within both groups. Large temples also have a tendency to unite *naivedyam* for the several deities in their daily practice. The food plan of the mighty divine beings may be slightly altered within a temple if it happens to be exceptionally good at preparing a particular cuisine. This is because they will be given the temple's specialty along with to their regular meals. In light of the Indian belief that divine beings are like humans in that they need food, serving foods to the gods is a completely natural activity. In some of the situations presented, the reason behind the selection of food items is obvious and based on objective standards; in other situations, it requires knowledge of certain cultural presumptions to be comprehended. When selecting freely accessible

foods and prioritizing those with significant economic value, the devotee is influenced by strong practical logic. While considering the ease of cooking and the preservation of the food served to the gods, rationality guides his/her selection of things based on his/her financial resources and encourages him/her to serve regional cuisine.

In any other situation, the argument behind food offerings is based on cultural beliefs that are not completely universal but may be shared by a number of different countries. The custom of serving particular foods originates from the cultural notion that oral and/or written sources of information may be unquestionably authoritative. A logical extension of the original concept that gods and humans share similar eating habits is the belief that gods favour the meals that they are used to eating. As a result, offering meals that are typical in the local community are served. Two notions explain the offering of unadulterated meals to the deities and the rejection of contaminated foods, that is the notion that meals can be both pure and impure, and secondly the belief that the gods are concerned with food purity. Although these concepts are present in other cultures as well, India appears to have developed them to a higher degree. Multiplications of cultural presumptions are discussed in the food offerings. Starts with gods are believed to have form and persona. Furthermore, foods are supposed to have character and eventually gods, like humans, are presumed to prefer foods that relate to their nature, and their temperament is considered to be impacted by the foods they eat. In summary, the food offerings of South India are a complicated phenomenon that combines logical and comparable understanding with tangible facts, mystical concepts, and symbolic expressions.

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Edible Inheritance: Culinary Memory and Gendered Heritage Practices among Dogras in Jammu Region, India

Mrinalini Atrey

Abstract

This paper explores the culinary traditions of the Dogra community in Jammu as dynamic embodiments of intangible cultural heritage, deeply rooted in ecological rhythms, ritual practice, and gendered transmission. Through ethnographic documentation and culinary analysis, it highlights how locally sourced vegetables, forest-foraged ingredients, and artisanal spice blends—shaped by seasonal rhythms and ceremonial abstentions—encode resilience, rootedness, and intergenerational continuity. Featuring an array of dishes that span daily sustenance and sacred observance—including festive breads (Babroo, Khamere, Kyuur), seasonal mains (Khatte Kulth, Allo Ambal, Khatta Meat), and ritual foods (Churma, Pugga, Ma-Kichdi, Gulra, Saasrut)—the paper situates Dogra cuisine within both domestic life and devotional practice. Particular attention is paid to the gendered architecture of culinary transmission, wherein women preserve taste memory through inherited pickling practices and everyday cooking, while men enact spiritual stewardship through deity-centric offerings. Framed through UNESCO’s Living Heritage lens and aligned with the objectives of Sustainable Development Goal 11, the study advances a participatory vision of heritage conservation. It proposes future initiatives across documentation, education, agricultural revival, and cultural programming—positioning Dogra foodways not as static relics, but as active vessels of identity, ecological wisdom, and community vitality.

Keywords: Cuisine, Gender, Heritage, Resilience, Ritual

Introduction: Foodways as Living Memory and Cultural Resilience

Dogra foodways—ritualised through preparation, seasonal rhythms, and communal sharing—are profound vessels of intangible cultural heritage. More than sustenance, they encode generational memory, ecological intimacy, and spiritual continuity. Recipes passed down through oral tradition, especially among women, reflect not only dietary practices but lived experiences of adaptive wisdom and identity-making.

Within this textured culinary landscape, festive breads and forest-foraged pickles become archives of resilience, each carrying ecological knowledge, ritual symbolism, and social cohesion. The timing and preparation of these dishes—rooted in spiritual calendars and domestic labour—knit together land, livelihood, and cultural ethos with quietly powerful precision. At the heart of Dogra culinary heritage lies the gendered transmission of knowledge. Women safeguard flavours and meaning through everyday cooking and seasonal foraging, while men contribute distinct ceremonial roles in preparing food for family deities—together forming a sacred choreography of taste, memory, and devotion.

This paper documents and analyses Dogra recipes as expressions of cultural resilience, gendered agency, and ecological awareness. Framing these traditions through the lens of UNESCO's *Living Heritage Framework* and Sustainable Development Goal 11 (SDG 11) advances a participatory vision of heritage conservation—one that positions Dogra foodways not as static relics but as evolving instruments of sustainability, community vitality, and intergenerational continuity.

Contextualising the Dogra Culinary Landscape

Topographical diversity directly shapes the foodways of its inhabitants, particularly the Dogra community, whose culinary practices remain closely tied to seasonal cycles and landscape-specific ingredients. The Jammu region—historically referred to as Darvabhisara—forms an ethnocultural bridge between the river systems of Jhelum and Ravi and the ascendant Pir Panjal ranges (Atrey, 5).¹ Once part of Madradesh during Vedic times, it is further divided into distinct sub-regions: the Eastern Plains, Eastern Hills, Western Plains, and Western Hills (Census of India 201).² This topographical diversity has directly shaped the foodways of its inhabitants, particularly the Dogra community, whose culinary practices are intimately tied to seasonal cycles and landscape-specific ingredients.

From ancient alliances—such as Abhisara’s diplomatic overture to Alexander—to successive migrations of Paharis, Gujjars, Gaddis, and Punjabi groups, the Jammu region has long been a crucible of cultural convergence. These movements fostered linguistic plurality and culinary dialogue, yet amid this mosaic, Dogra culture emerged as a unifying thread. Through the cadence of Dogri language and the shared grammar of taste, Dogra cuisine evolved not merely as sustenance but as a cultural mediator, preserving identity through ritual, vocabulary, and embodied memory.

Primarily rooted in the eastern plains of Duggar illaqa, the Dogra community’s imprint extends from ancestral centres such as Basholi and Jasrota into the hill tracts of neighbouring Himachal Pradesh. Their culinary traditions, though deeply rooted, have continually absorbed the flavours and techniques of diverse groups—tribal communities such as the Gaddi, Sippis, and Gujjar-Bakarwals, as well as Mirpuris, Sikhs, Muslims, Jains, and Aggarwals—each contributing distinctive ingredients and practices to a shared culinary heritage. This openness to adaptation, anchored by the presence of Dogri, has enabled Dogra cuisine to bridge ethnic boundaries and foster communal belonging. Through festive platters, seasonal preparations, and shared feasting rituals, it continues to weave memory and identity into the everyday palate of the region.

Foodways as Intangible Heritage: Gaps, Frameworks, and Research Imperatives

This study builds upon a broad spectrum of scholarship recognising foodways as dynamic vessels of cultural memory, ecological connection, and social cohesion. At the international level, frameworks such as UNESCO’s *30 Culinary Traditions Around the World* affirm that ritual food practices—like Korea’s kimchi or Turkey’s *keşkek*—serve as embodied expressions of living heritage, mediating the everyday and the ceremonial through taste, seasonality, and narrative (UNESCO).

In the Indian context, the *National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage* curated by the Ministry of Culture formally acknowledges regional cuisines as critical markers of identity and continuity (Survey of India). Grassroot initiatives such as the *Indian Community Cookbook Project* enrich this landscape by recovering underrepresented food narratives in oral, digital, and archival

formats—highlighting adaptation and resilience amidst rapid sociocultural change (Indian Community Cookbook Project).

Academic contributions further nuance these perspectives. As Najmieh Batmanglij demonstrates in *Food of Life*, culinary ritual becomes a powerful medium of cultural continuity in Persian contexts (Batmanglij). Matt Goulding's *Rice, Noodle, Fish* portrays Japan's foodscape as an experiential terrain where taste and travel converge (Goulding). William Sitwell's *A History of Food in 100 Recipes* underscores cuisine as a temporal archive of human innovation, tracing how recipes embody shifts in culture and technology (Sitwell). In the Indian context, Malhotra, Sharma, and Dogra's *Food Culture Studies in India* provides robust analytical tools for examining how consumption, representation, and identity intersect across regional culinary traditions (Malhotra, Sharma, and Dogra).

Yet, conspicuously absent from this expanding discourse is the food heritage of Jammu, especially that of the Dogra community. Apart from scattered references in journalistic and cultural outlets, academic engagement remains minimal. Although I find Om Goswami's *Dogra Khaan Paan Evam Ahaar* foundational, its limited accessibility has restricted broader scholarly engagement (Goswami).

This study directly responds to that lacuna. Drawing upon UNESCO's Living Heritage Framework and aligned with the principles of SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), it foregrounds the Dogra culinary repertoire not just as a subject of preservation, but as a participatory process of cultural regeneration. Through systematic documentation, community engagement, and interpretive analysis, the research seeks to decode the symbolic, ecological, and gendered dimensions of Dogra foodways—contributing to an emergent model of food heritage scholarship grounded in inclusivity, sustainability, and lived experience.

Framework of Inquiry and Engagement

Culinary Cartography and Ecological Memory

To meticulously document the culinary landscape of the Dogra community—from the rhythm of daily meals to the ceremonial gravitas of ritual dishes and forest-foraged seasonal pickles. Iconic recipes such as *Babroo*, *Khamere*, *Kyuur*,

Khatta Meat, and *Lasooda* pickle are treated not merely as gastronomic artefacts, but as living archives of ecological wisdom and local ingenuity—warranting preservation, reinterpretation, and thoughtful revitalisation in contemporary contexts.

Cultural Semiotics and Ritual Meaning-Making

To interpret the embedded symbolism, ritual expressions, and social textures of Dogra food practices—tracing how culinary acts become vessels of identity, vehicles of communal bonding, and mediums of resilience across lifecycle ceremonies and seasonal festivals. Taste, in this context, becomes a mnemonic device—a sensory archive of belonging and remembrance.

Gendered Stewardship and Culinary Transmission

To analyse the distinct yet intertwined roles of women and men in sustaining culinary heritage. Women emerge as custodians of everyday knowledge, preserving oral traditions, recipes, and resourceful techniques of seasonal preparation. Men participate as spiritual stewards, crafting offerings for family deities and officiating sacred feasts such as *Taam* and *Pugga Vrat*—each act underscoring a gendered choreography of ritual care and cultural continuity.

Anchored in a participatory and interdisciplinary methodology, this inquiry seeks to cultivate a foundational resource for heritage documentation, educational praxis, and policy engagement. In reframing Dogra cuisine as *living heritage*—evolving through embodied practice and rooted in local wisdom—the study aligns with broader strategies for cultural sustainability articulated through UNESCO’s *Living Heritage Framework* and the ambitions of SDG 11.

Research design, Methodology and Ethical Considerations

This research employed a mixed-methods approach, drawing upon the researcher’s insider perspective as a member of the Dogra community to document and analyse the region’s evolving culinary heritage. This positionality facilitated a nuanced understanding and ensured cultural sensitivity throughout the study. Foundational knowledge was first established through a comprehensive review of existing literature, cultural websites, and Dogri textual materials, which provided essential historical context.

Building on this groundwork, a structured interview protocol was developed, comprising ten thematic sections designed to elicit detailed insights from elderly Dogra women, heritage association members, and regional experts. These themes encompassed personal food habits, traditional recipes, sourcing practices, cultural celebrations, ingredients and local sourcing, sustainability and environmental practices, gender roles, modern influences and adaptations, community preservation, and personal reflections. Data from these semi-structured interviews were integrated with document analysis to create a holistic representation of Dogra culinary practices. Interactive validation sessions with regional heritage experts further refined the findings, ensuring cultural accuracy and robustness.

Throughout the study, careful attention was given to ethical and human rights considerations in data collection and community engagement, particularly with women participants. Traditional protocols were respected during conversations with women and young girls, and the study refrains from disclosing names or identities in accordance with participants' wishes. Women respondents, in particular, requested not to be photographed and preferred to remain covered—a choice that was fully honoured in the documentation process.

Documentation

This documentation is based primarily on interviews conducted with members of the Dogra community, supplemented by the author's lived experience as part of the same cultural milieu.

Traditional Recipes of the Dogra Community

The Dogra region's diverse topography, encompassing both plains and hilly areas, engenders distinct culinary traditions. In the fertile plains, cuisine emphasises a variety of grains, legumes, and fresh vegetables. Conversely, the hilly terrain favours locally sourced root vegetables and hardy grains such as maize, adapted to the cooler climate. Dishes are characteristically hearty, providing sustenance in colder conditions.

Staple Ingredients

In the plains, wheat and rice are staple cereals, while maize predominates in the hills. Everyday meals feature vegetables and a range of lentils and legumes,

consumed with rice and wheat roti, a traditional unleavened bread. Key lentil varieties include *rajma* (kidney beans), *chana dal* (split black chickpeas), *ma ki dal* (whole black lentils), and *kulth* (horse gram). During festive occasions, these are often prepared as *madra*, a yoghurt-based dish enriched with dried fruits. Another preparation, *Teliya ma*, involves soaking black lentils in mustard oil before cooking. *Kulth* (horse gram), a local legume, is primarily consumed during winter. Recent agricultural diversification has introduced other lentils and pulses, including *hari moong* (green gram), *lal masoor* (red lentil), and French beans. Among Dogra non-vegetarians, *Khatta Meat* holds a special place. This lamb dish, prepared in a sour curry, is both simple and distinctive. Traditionally, the tangy flavour is achieved with dry mango powder (*amchoor*), though variations may use tamarind or other souring agents

Festive Breads

Breads prepared for festivals and auspicious occasions differ from everyday fare, featuring deep-fried varieties such as *babroo*, *khamere*, and *thothrou*. *Babroo* is made from a deep-fried mixture of flour and jaggery, while *khamere* utilises fermented flour and salt. *Thothrou* is a smaller variant of *Khamere*.

Local Vegetables

Local vegetables integral to Dogra cuisine includes *kaddu ambal* (pumpkin), *gucchi* (morel mushroom), *tarad*, cabbage, cauliflower, radish, carrot, and potatoes. While many are traditional, some appear to have been introduced from external sources.

Seasonal rhythms have traditionally governed the availability of fruits and vegetables in the Dogra region. Summer produce such as mangoes, watermelon, and musk melon was once consumed only during its natural cycle, reinforcing cultural associations between food and season. However, advancements in transportation, agricultural practices, and globalisation have made many fruits and vegetables accessible year-round. While this shift has introduced convenience and variety, it has also altered traditional diets and weakened the cultural significance of consuming seasonal foods at their appointed times.

Wild Edible Plants, Leaves, Roots, and Tubers in Dogra Cuisine

The Dogra community possesses extensive knowledge of wild edible species, utilising a variety of leaves, roots, and tubers, reflecting a deep connection with their local environment and a wealth of traditional knowledge. This diverse array of edible plants, ranging from leafy greens, fruits, and tubers to seeds and mushrooms, underscores the Dogra community's rich culinary heritage and profound connection to their local environment. Their ability to identify and utilise these plants reflects a wealth of traditional knowledge and resourcefulness. The existence of oral traditions related to these plants hints at an even deeper connection. This resourcefulness, informed by generations of tradition, will be further illuminated by future explorations of related oral narratives.

A detailed tabular appendix, (see *Appendix I*), showcases the diverse applications of 44 plant species within Dogra culture. This comprehensive resource provides a cornerstone of information, including botanical and local names, edible parts, culinary and medicinal uses, native locations, and nutritional and medicinal properties. This documentation reveals that plants like *Amaranthus viridis* (Charleri), *Chenopodium album* (Bathu), and *Malva parviflora* (Swanchal) are integral leafy greens, while tubers and roots such as *Dioscorea* species (Tarar, Tagald) and *Caralluma tuberculata* (Charungli) are used in cooked dishes and pickles. Fruits like *Aegle marmelos* (Bael), *Punica granatum* (Pomegranate), and *Zizyphus mauritianum* (Ber) are consumed raw, offering natural vitamins. Unique items like *Acacia modesta* (Phulaigum) gum, fried and eaten, and *Gucchi* (morel mushrooms), a non-cultivable delicacy, highlight the diversity of food resources.

Beyond culinary uses, these plants exhibit significant medicinal properties. *Embllica officinalis* (Amla), rich in Vitamin C, is used for its antioxidant, anticancer, and anti-inflammatory properties (Dar et al.). *Rubus ellipticus* (Syari) treats fevers and gastric issues, and *Carissa opaca* (Garna) addresses indigestion and skin problems (Dar et al.). *Chenopodium album* (Bathu) acts as a blood purifier, and *Moringa oleifera* (Sohanjna) has antioxidant and anti-inflammatory benefits. *Ficus auriculata* (Trimbal) is a calcium source for lactating women, and *Szygium cummini* (Jamoon) supports cardiovascular health.

The regional specificity of these plants underscores the diverse ecological zones of Jammu. *Acacia modesta* (Phulaigum) is found in Nandini, *Rubus ellipticus* (Syari) in hilly regions, and *Dioscorea bulbifera* (Tagald) in the Krimchi

area (Dar et al.). *Diospyrus lotus* (Maluk) is prevalent in Ramban, and *Phoenix sylvestris* (Khajoor) in the Kandi belt. The consumption of *Dioscorea belophylla* (Tarar) around the Shivratri festival in Shivkhori highlights the cultural integration of these plants. *Diospyrus lotus* (Maluk) is used as a dry fruit during the Lohri Festival. The belief that Jammu got its name from Jamoon reflects the deep-rooted cultural association.

The table also hints at changing availability and consumption patterns. *Carissa opaca* (Garna), once a popular summer fruit, is now hardly available. *Momordica dioica* (Kakora) is not much in use now. *Lactuca dolicophylla* (Gundhali) was initially found in Panchheri but is now available in other places. *Nelumbo nucifera* (Kamal kakdi), originally from Kashmir, is now cultivated in some parts of Jammu. *Lopidium sativum* (Halayan) is not native, brought from outside. This reflects the impact of changing agricultural practices, ecological shifts, and evolving food preferences.

Many of these plants possess significant nutritional and medicinal properties. For instance, *Amaranthus viridis* (Charleri) and *Chenopodium album* (Bathu) are recognised for their high nutritional content, serving as valuable dietary supplements. Traditional uses of plants like *Acacia modesta* (Phulaigum) and *Berberis lyceum* (Kambel) highlight their therapeutic applications.

The availability of these plants varies seasonally and regionally. For example, *Embllica officinalis* (Amla) is harvested from November to March, while *Dioscorea belophylla* (Tarar) is traditionally collected around the Shivratri festival. This seasonality underscores the community's dependence on local and seasonal produce. Species such as *Cordia dichotoma* (Lasoor) and *Diplazium esculentum* (Kasrod) are commonly used in pickles, whereas *Bauhinia variegata* (Kachnar) is incorporated into curries and stir-fried dishes.

While some plants remain widely available, others have become less common or are now commercially produced. This shift has impacted traditional practices and livelihoods, exemplified by the commercialisation of pickles from forest products. The introduction of pesticides in agriculture has significantly reduced the availability of traditional greens (saag), such as *Diplazium esculentum* (Kasrod) and *Portulaca oleracea* (Loonki), in fields and forest areas.

This cultural significance highlights the integral role of these plants in Dogra heritage. The utilisation of local and indigenous flora reflects sustainable

practices and a harmonious relationship with the natural environment. Reliance on wild edibles and forest products demonstrates traditional foraging knowledge and resource management. Thus, this survey helps us in understanding the traditional knowledge of using these plants for food and medicine, highlighting the rich biodiversity and cultural heritage of the Jammu region.

Pickles from Forest Produce

The Dogra community has also mastered local forest products into famous pickles of *Lasooda*, *Kasrod*, *Hari Mirch*, *Tyou*, *Tarad* and *Kadam*. However, these items are now being produced commercially in urban areas. This has resulted in the loss of means of livelihood for some, especially women. They use simple techniques to prepare these pickles, which are an essential part of their everyday meals.

Lasooda (Glue Berry) known for its unique texture, is typically pickled with a blend of spices, oil, and salt. The berries are first cleaned and boiled before being mixed with spices and oil. *Kasrod* (Fiddlehead Ferns) also undergoes a similar process of cleaning, boiling, and then mixing with mustard oil and spices. The pickling process enhances flavour and preserves ferns for longer use. In *Hari Mirch* (Green Chilli) *aachar*, the chillies are slit and stuffed with a mixture of spices and mustard oil. They are then sun-dried and stored in jars, allowing the flavours to meld. *Tyou* (wild mangoes) are cut into pieces and pickled with a blend of spices, oil, and salt. The tangy taste of mangoes makes this a popular pickle. The *tarad* (sponge gourd) is pickled via traditional methods of cleaning, boiling, and mixing with spices and oil. *Kadam* (Kholrabi/cabbage turnip) is pickled similarly to other local ingredients, highlighting the resourcefulness of Dogras in utilising available resources. In addition to *Kadam*, other vegetables, such as carrot, radish, cauliflower, turnip, and bitter gourd, are also used for making pickles. The onset of summer produces raw mangoes, which are used to make pickles, *chutneys* (Indian sauces) and other varieties to beat the summer heat.

These pickles are an integral part of Dogra cuisine, adding distinctive flavours to meals. They often serve as accompaniment to main dishes and are enjoyed during festive occasions and everyday meals alike. The commercialisation of these pickles in urban areas has led to the loss of livelihood for many who rely on traditional pickle-making as a source of income. The shift

from homemade pickles to commercially produced pickles highlight the economic and social changes affecting the community.

Beverages/Tea

Dogras are fond of beverages such as *lassi* and *chhaacha* (buttermilk), with *lassi* being sweet and *chhaacha* salty. Another popular drink is kanji, which was consumed during the Holi festival in March and is made from water, black carrots, beetroot, mustard seeds, and *hing* (asafoetida). When it comes to hot drinks, tea has always been preferred. While people now favour Indianized English tea, during winter they prefer desi chai made from unfermented, sun-dried tea leaves of *Camellia*. Although these tea leaves are not grown in the Jammu region, they are brought from other areas. Notably, the hilly areas of the region consume approximately 20-24 varieties of local tea, including *Chinar* (Maple) tea and *Mastani* tea (shrub tea), as well as *Catharanthus Roseus* tea (**Fig. 1**) and *Carissa spinarum* leaf tea (**Fig. 2**). Historically, there was an unsuccessful attempt to cultivate tea in the Ramnagar area during the Maharaja's rule.



Fig. 1. Catharanthus Roseus Tea (OP Sharma)



Fig. 2. Carissa Spinarum Leaf Tea (OP Sharma)

Ritual-Specific Food

Ritual-specific food has its cultural significance within the Dogra community, highlighting the intricate relationship between food, festivals, and family traditions. For example, *Diospyros lotus* (*Maluk*) is used as a dry fruit during the *Lohri* festival, and the consumption of certain plants is linked to traditional

festivals and rituals.³ Products such as *sabudana* (sago), *singhaada atta* (water chestnut flour), *kattu atta* (inner fruit part of the buckwheat plant), and *samak rice* (barnyard millet), which are consumed during *Navratri* fasts and other regular fasts, are also grown in the Jammu region. *Sabudana* (Sago) is cultivated in areas with tropical palm trees, such as the hilly regions around Jammu.⁴ *Singhaada atta* (Water Chestnut Flour) is grown in aquatic environments, particularly in the wetlands and water bodies around Jammu. *Kuttu Atta* (Buckwheat Flour) is cultivated in the hilly areas of Jammu, including regions such as Doda, Kishtwar, and Bhaderwah. *Samak rice* (Barnyard Millet) is grown in fertile plains and hilly areas, including regions such as Kathua, Reasi, and Udhampur.

Churma, *Pugga*, *Kyuur*, *Dahi-Aloo*, *Ma-Kichdi*, *Gulra*, and *Saasrut meethe ruth* form food items for special occasions. They are not part of normal cuisine. *Churma*, prepared by roasting wheat and sugar in *ghee* (oil from cow milk), is consumed during *Vrat* (fast). It is used as an offering and as food in *vrats* (fast), which are observed weekly, especially those kept on Mondays and Thursdays. *Pugga* is made of ground sesame seeds and jaggery and is consumed by women on the day of the *Pugga vrat*.⁵ *Pugga* has now become a famous sweet meat that is consumed during the winter. *Pugga*, which women consume during fast is a simple mixture of sesame seeds and jaggery, unlike metamorphosed sweetmeat. In addition to *Pugga*, *Bachh Dua*, *Drubari*, and *Hoyi* are also *vrats* that women observe for family welfare. They cook *suttu-puttu* (coil-shaped things prepared using wheat and jaggery). *Dahi aloo* refers to potatoes cooked in curd and can be consumed in any *vrat*. *Ma-Kichidi* is cooked on the day of *Makar Sankranti* (usually January 14--15) when the winter solstice ends the day after *Lohri*. *Ma-Kichidi* is prepared from a new harvest of rice and black gram *daal*. It is considered an auspicious day throughout India as well.

Kyuur is crafted from a white flour batter, intricately shaped into geometric designs during shallow frying on a griddle. The bridegroom and his friends are welcomed at the bride's place with the *Khyyur* feast. The bride's sisters and her friends offer it to him with sugar and curd. The tradition is to do this before the marriage ceremony takes place. However, it has also become a delicacy offered to guests. *Charolian*, similar to *Kyuur*, is prepared during the monsoon season. It is made from a thin paste of fine white flour, poured into an earthen vessel with four tubular holes. This paste is then allowed to flow onto a griddle, creating parallel lines as it cooks. The primary difference between *Kyuur* and *Charolian*

lies in the method of preparation: *Charolian* uses the earthen vessel to shape the batter, while *Kyuur* is crafted by hand.

Gulra and *Saasrut* are the items the bride takes along with her to her in-laws' house. *Gulra*, a sweet delicacy, is crafted from ground rice blended with aromatic fennel seeds and various dried fruits. *Saasrut*, a large, round snack fashioned from white flour, holds a significant place in marriage customs. While smaller versions of *Saasrut* are generously distributed in quantities of 101, 201, or 501 among the relatives and friends of a newly formed family, a singular, exceptionally large *Saasrut* is reserved exclusively for the mother-in-law, highlighting her honoured position within the family structure.

Sund, a nourishing blend of dried fruits cooked in desi ghee (clarified butter), is a traditional gift from parents to their pregnant daughter during her baby shower. This custom highlights the enduring support a woman receives from her family, even after marriage. Traditionally prepared by the women of the household, *sund* has now become a widely available delicacy, readily found in sweet shops.

Meethe Rut, a large, pancake-like dish made from slowly cooked wheat, jaggery, and oil, is a traditional offering to family deities. Typically, male members of the family prepare this dish, likely due to the common location of family deities outside the home, where men traditionally conduct rituals. However, when the offering is made to a female deity within the household, women take on the cooking responsibilities. These ritual-specific foods and traditions underscore the Dogra community's deep cultural and spiritual connections, illustrating how food serves as a powerful medium for expressing and maintaining their heritage.

Dietary Restrictions

While *Rajmah*, *Channadaal*, and *Kaddu Ambal* with rice and *Khmeere* form the traditional main course on important occasions such as births, marriages, and deaths, certain recipes still have specific cultural restrictions. For example, *kheer* (rice pudding) is traditionally prepared only for rituals connected with death or as an offering to snake deities. It is not cooked during birth or marriage celebrations.

The *vrats* (fasts) that the Dogras (being the followers of Hinduism) observe have the same food restrictions as those in other parts of India. However, the restrictions are different in some *vrats* where local deities are venerated. When *Hoyi* fast, instead of being a normal noncereal food, it is imperative to cook *khatta* saag (mustard leaves with a tangy flavour)), *ruṭṭ* (round pancakes of wheat and jaggery), *dahi* (curd), *rongi* (black-eyed peas), and *khichdi* (mixture of rice and black lentil).⁶ It is offered to the goddess and then consumed. In *Bacha dua*, another fast for the welfare of children, mothers observe a fast by eating only one meal and avoiding cow milk/milk products and fried foods.⁷

The Dogra community adheres to strict seasonal consumption norms for fruits and snacks, reflecting a deep understanding of natural rhythms and health. Mangoes, Melons, and other similar fruits are typically eaten only at the onset of the summer, which is after the Baisakhi festival, which occurs on April 13.⁸ This custom not only marks the beginning of the summer fruit season but also ensures that the fruits are consumed at their peak ripeness, increasing their flavour and nutritional value. *Amla* (Indian gooseberry) is consumed only after *Amla Naumi* (the 9th day of the waxing of the moon in November), when it is taken under the same tree along with rice and the black gram *Kichhdi*.⁹

Similarly, snacks such as roasted *mugfali* (peanuts) and *rewaris* (jaggery and sesame seeds/peanuts toffee-like sweets) are consumed only after the first winter shower. It is believed that eating them before this time could lead to a cough and other related illnesses. This practice likely originated from the wisdom of consuming foods that are seasonally appropriate and beneficial for health.

Despite the influence of modernisation, many Dogra families continue to adhere to these traditional consumption norms. This adherence demonstrates the community's respect for their cultural heritage and the practical wisdom embedded in these practices. By following these norms, they maintain a connection to their ancestors and the natural rhythms of the seasons.

Curd and Tamarind in Dogra cooking

Dogra cooking often involves curd and tamarind, adding unique flavours to various dishes. Many lentils and pulses are prepared with curd and tamarind, increasing their taste and digestive properties. The renowned *khatta meat*, a goat meat dish cooked with tamarind or *anardana* (dried pomegranate seeds), epitomises this tradition (Marg). Similarly, pumpkins (*Ambal*), potatoes (*Khatte*

Aloo), and *Kulthes* (a type of lentil) are cooked in tamarinds, creating delicious and easily digestible recipes. *Auria* (boiled potatoes dipped in a mixture of curd, mustard oil and mustard seeds), *Maani* (made from semi-ripe mangoes), *Timbroo ki Chutney*, *Anardaanae ki Chutney* (made from unripe dried pomegranate, mint, etc.) are also common examples of these tangy additions.

Along with agriculture, locals, especially the Gujjar/Bakerwal tribe, are involved in cattle rearing, which leads to an abundant supply of milk to the region. This probably explains the use of milk and milk products in traditional cooking. More surprisingly, extra milk has been used to make many traditional items, such as *paneer* (a major ingredient in several dishes), *Kalari* (a delicacy of fermented milk), sweetmeats such as *palangthor* (milk cake), *Kaada* (a hot drink of milk with many dry fruits), *lassi* and *Chaacha* (buttermilk, often consumed as a refreshing beverage). The innovative use of surplus milk in these traditional items highlights the culinary creativity of the Dogra people and reflects their resourcefulness and commitment to sustainability.

Traditional Community Feasting: ‘Taam’ and ‘Dhaan Kadna’

Another distinctive feature of Dogra cuisine is its traditional community feasting called *Taam* and the whole process called *Dhaan Kadna* method of cooking, known as *Dhaan kadna*. This involves preparing food in an open area, using a unique setup where the items to be cooked, including rice, are placed in a line over a fire that burns in a deep, narrow trench (referred to as "*Dhaan*") in a straight line. This slow cooking process imparts a special flavour and texture to the dishes. The process, *Dhaan Kadna*, has well-established rules to follow. The fuel for cooking consists of wooden logs, preferably from old and dried trees, which are cut and split into smaller pieces called '*Barnelian*'. The traditional cook, known as the *Sain*, oversees the entire cooking process. After a ritual bath, he dons a dhoti and arrives at the designated area for cooking, usually at dawn, and does not wear shoes while cooking. The dishes are prepared in '*Saglas*', large copper vessels, over a slow flame, which imparts a distinct taste and aroma. This whole process has set rules to be followed. Typical dishes include *Rajma*, *Chana Dal*, *Maa ka Madra*, mixed vegetables, and *Mitha Putt* (sweetened rice), with *kauri roti* added for mourning feasts. This food is served in traditional biodegradable plates, *pattal*, and *doonas* elaborated below. Unlike modern buffets, which prioritise individual choice and convenience, *Taam* emphasises a deeply communal dining experience. Guests are seated in rows on mats, a practice that fosters equality and togetherness by eliminating hierarchical seating

and encouraging close interaction. This shared experience reinforces social bonds and strengthens community ties, creating a sense of unity. However, as communities modernise, this tradition, once widespread, is now largely confined to village settings, where the social fabric and available space allow for its continued practice, preserving a vital aspect of Dogra cultural heritage. Moreover, *Sain*, the traditional cook, also holds a place of honour in the Dogra community, evidenced by the customary gifts he receives after a *Taam* feast. As a token of appreciation for his vital role, he is presented with clothes, monetary compensation, and a portion of the prepared food and sweets to share with his family. This practice underscores the deep respect and gratitude the Dogra people extend to those who contribute to the communal well-being, recognising the essential nature of their service.



Fig. 3. Traditional cooking, called *Dhaan Kadna*. Photography by Mrinalini Atrey

Traditional Plates and Saucers: Patal and Doonas

As mentioned above, in the course of *Taam*, dishes are traditionally served on plates and saucers made of leaves, locally known as *patal*s and *doonas*. These eco-friendly utensils are crafted from the leaves of *Maloongad* (camel foot tree) or vine, which is abundant in the Shivalik hills from Nagrota onwards, as well as in Utterbehni and Surinsar. In the Kandi belt (dry area), people use leaves from the *Palash/Dhaak* (flame of the forest tree). This practice is an exemplary model of sustainability, as it avoids the use of plastic disposables that are harmful to the environment. Unlike modern plastic utensils, *patal*s and *doonas* are

biodegradable, reducing waste and environmental impact. This not only preserves the environment but also keeps the tradition alive, connecting the people to their roots and natural surroundings. This practice highlights the Dogra people's sustainable approach and highlights their deep connection with nature. Using *patals* and *doonas* is a great example of sustainability, offering an eco-friendly alternative to the plastic disposables commonly used today. Interestingly, although plastic disposables have become more common in Jammu in recent years, many people are now returning to the traditional use of *patals* and *doonas*, reinforcing their commitment to environmental sustainability.



Fig. 4. *Patal* making. Photograph by Mrinalini Atrey



Fig. 5. *Doonas*. Photograph by Mrinalini Atrey

Gendered Roles and the Preservation of Culinary Heritage

In the Dogra cultural landscape, cooking is more than sustenance—it is ceremony, storytelling, and survival. Every flame lit in the kitchen reverberates with ancestral rhythm, shaping a legacy where hands, rituals, and relationships intertwine. The gendered terrain of Dogra culinary practice reveals an intricate choreography of roles, each steeped in symbolism and resilience.

From childhood, girls are apprenticed into this tradition—learning by watching, listening, and stirring alongside mothers and grandmothers whose recipes are both instruction and inheritance. These everyday rituals of food preparation encode ecological, medicinal, and seasonal knowledge, making women custodians of intangible cultural memory. Their kitchens are sanctuaries where heritage simmers gently in earthen pots.

Yet, this tapestry also reserves sacred spaces for men, particularly within spiritual and ceremonial contexts. On Nag Panchami, the ritual offerings to the

Naag deity—a serpent spirit deeply woven into Dogra cosmology—are prepared by male members. Women, meanwhile, perform associated rituals within the kitchen, crafting symbolic drawings and preparing ritual food, honouring the spatial and spiritual boundaries that define communal worship. The hearth becomes a threshold of devotion; the anthill, a site of reverence and exclusion. Similarly, at the *Dehri*, the shrine of the family deity, men take on the role of culinary intermediaries. Preparing *Rutt* and *Mithai* for ancestral offerings is not simply about food—it is an embodied act of spiritual stewardship. The *Dehri*, often distinct from the daily kitchen, marks a liminal space where food becomes prayer and memory.

Conversely, women's ritual culinary labour shines during fasts like *Pugga vrata*, *Bachh Dua*, *Drubari*, and *Hoyi*, as well as lifecycle events such as birth and marriage. These ceremonies, layered with symbolism, are orchestrated entirely by women—from the weaving of wedding accessories to the construction of an earthen stove (*Khule Shagun*) for community feasts. Here, ritual and reciprocity converge, underscoring women's roles as cultural architects. Traditions like *Dhaan kadna*, once the preserve of male chefs, now echo with change. Professionalisation has swept in, signalling the community's adaptability to modernity without severing ties to ancestral rhythm. This shift, rather than diluting heritage, reveals a dynamic negotiation between past and present.

Ultimately, the division of culinary labour in Dogra practice is neither rigid nor reductive—it is ritual collaboration. Women ground the community in daily nourishment and inherited wisdom; men lift its spirit through ritual offerings and ancestral tribute. Together, they enact a holistic vision of heritage where food, memory, and meaning converge. This interwoven participation exemplifies the very essence of sustainability celebrated by global frameworks like SDG 11 and UNESCO's Living Heritage ethos—affirming that resilience resides not only in preservation but in participation.

Synthesis of Findings: Navigating Continuity and Change in Dogra Foodways

The analysis of Dogra cuisine reveals it as a living tapestry of intangible cultural heritage—one that balances ecological awareness, ritual symbolism, and social collaboration, yet also contends with the pressures of modernisation and change. The core findings are as follows:

Culinary Diversity and Agricultural Ingenuity

- Dogra cuisine thrives on locally sourced pulses, vegetables, grains, and dairy products.
- These ingredients reflect nuanced agricultural knowledge and adaptations to Jammu's varied terrain.

Preservation through Forest Produce and Ritual Foods

- Seasonal pickles and ritual-specific dishes, often made from wild and foraged ingredients, demonstrate sustainable culinary traditions.
- These practices highlight localised ecological wisdom and the ability to optimise available resources meaningfully.

Gendered Roles and Culinary Transmission

- Women serve as primary stewards of daily and ceremonial recipes, transmitting culinary knowledge through hands-on teaching and oral traditions.
- Men engage in ritual cooking, especially during offerings to family deities and sacred feasting practices.
- Together, these gendered roles reflect a collaborative approach to cultural preservation.

Cultural Identity and Social Cohesion

- Traditional recipes reinforce community values, spiritual beliefs, and familial connections.
- Food functions as a symbolic vehicle for cultural continuity, anchoring both public celebrations and private rituals.

Environmental Ethics and Sustainability

- Traditional cooking methods, such as *Dhaan Kadna* (trench-fire slow cooking), exemplify ecological sensitivity and flavour integrity.
- The use of biodegradable leaf plates (*patals* and *doonas*) reflects a longstanding commitment to sustainable living.

Challenges of Modernisation and Globalisation

- Increased access to year-round produce and commercial food systems has altered seasonal eating patterns and traditional food preparation.
- Commercialisation of home-based food practices—like pickle-making—has impacted women's roles and livelihoods.
- Cultural knowledge around seasonal consumption and ritual timing risks erosion in urbanised contexts.

Hybrid Crops and Agricultural Vulnerability

- The introduction of hybrid maize varieties in hilly regions, though high-yielding, has led to the decline of sweeter, indigenous strains.
- Farmers rely more on external seed suppliers, reducing autonomy and increasing economic pressure.
- These changes threaten both agricultural heritage and biodiversity linked to Dogra foodways.

Culinary Resilience through Ritual Practice

- Despite external pressures, Dogra culinary heritage persists through intergenerational practices, communal feasting, and ritual observances.
- This resilience reflects a deep commitment to balancing progress with the preservation of ancestral rhythms and ecological ethics.

Safeguarding Dogra Culinary Heritage in a Changing Landscape

Dogra culinary heritage, rich with ecological wisdom, ritual significance, and gendered knowledge systems, stands at a critical juncture. The transmission of recipes, seasonal practices, and foraged ingredients is increasingly fragmented by structural, economic, and cultural pressures:

Endangered Knowledge Systems

- Oral transmission remains the primary mode of culinary knowledge exchange, yet is increasingly vulnerable due to urban migration, nuclear family structures, and generational disconnects.

- The absence of centralised documentation has led to scattered preservation efforts, with few accessible resources for educators, researchers, or community members.

Decline of Indigenous Ingredients

- Traditional crops such as heirloom maize and forest-foraged greens are disappearing, displaced by commercial farming and changing consumption patterns.
- Ritual-specific ingredients are becoming inaccessible, leading to erosion in seasonal food observances.

Gendered Knowledge at Risk

- Women's culinary labour—especially in practices like pickle-making, ritual fasting meals, and oral storytelling—is undervalued and often unrecorded in heritage discourse.
- Young women increasingly face constraints (economic, temporal, institutional) that hinder engagement with traditional foodways.

Institutional Gaps

- Dogra cuisine is absent from formal curriculum, culinary institutes, and policy frameworks related to ICH safeguarding.
- Limited infrastructural support has restricted the integration of food traditions into broader cultural promotion and sustainable development efforts.

Toward a Participatory Model for Culinary Preservation

To respond meaningfully to these challenges, the following interconnected initiatives are proposed, grounded in the principles of UNESCO's *Living Heritage Framework* and SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities.

Archival and Digital Preservation

- Establish structured documentation of recipes, techniques, and ingredient origins through text, audio, and visual formats.

- Create a community-driven digital archive featuring searchable databases, geotagged content, and user-generated memories to foster pride and accessibility.

Agricultural Revitalisation

- Support the cultivation of traditional crops via microgrants, sustainable farming workshops, and certification schemes.
- Build farmer–retailer partnerships and localised marketplaces to reinforce food sovereignty and economic resilience.

Educational Outreach

- Integrate Dogra foodways into school and college curricula, prioritising storytelling, hands-on cooking, and ecological literacy.
- Collaborate with institutions like the Food Craft Institute of Kerala and women’s colleges to support research, pedagogy, and community workshops.

Community Engagement and Knowledge Transmission

- Host intergenerational workshops, oral history circles, and seasonal festivals centred on ritual foods.
- Leverage existing cultural gatherings (such as shrine congregations) to capture male culinary roles and broaden gendered narratives of heritage.

Public Programming and Policy Integration

- Organise culinary fairs, exhibitions, and recipe performances that celebrate symbolic foods and seasonal rituals.
- Partner with cultural departments, media, NGOs, and universities to amplify outreach, fund projects, and position Dogra cuisine within regional tourism and national heritage strategies.

In retracing the contours of Dogra culinary heritage—from ritual fasting meals to forest-foraged pickles—this study affirms food’s role as a vessel of ecological wisdom, gendered transmission, and cultural resilience. More than a record of recipes, Dogra cuisine emerges as a living archive shaped by community memory and adaptive practice. Anchored within the ethos of SDG 11 (*Sustainable Cities and Communities*), this roadmap advances inclusive, resilient, and culturally

vibrant ecosystems where culinary heritage thrives as a dynamic practice. The focus on community engagement, economic empowerment, and educational transmission resonates with UNESCO's Living Heritage Framework, which highlights intergenerational knowledge and participatory safeguarding. Through structured documentation, ecological awareness, and collaborative celebration, Dogra foodways transcend preservation as static memory to become active instruments of identity, sustainability, and cultural continuity. In doing so, they offer a scalable model for heritage stewardship amid global cultural and ecological change—underscoring the enduring vitality of Dogra traditions in shaping the future.

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The author expresses sincere gratitude to the elderly Dogra women, heritage association members, and regional experts who generously shared their knowledge and experiences, contributing significantly to the data collection for this research. Their insights were invaluable in understanding the nuances of Dogra culinary traditions. Special thanks are due to Shri O P Sharma, Chief Principal Conservator Forests (retd.) J&K Govt, for providing crucial inputs and expertise regarding wild edible plants, which significantly enriched the study's findings. The author declares no competing interests. This study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants for inclusion in the research and for the publication of related findings, including data and images where applicable. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of publication and the potential use of their information. Due to confidentiality considerations, certain data generated during this study are not publicly available. However, aggregated datasets may be obtained from the author upon reasonable request.

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Notes:

¹The Jammu region was historically identified as the Darva Abhisara tract, named after the Darva and Abhisara tribes dwelling here in pre-Mauryan times. Darva lay between the Chenab and Ravi rivers, corresponding to present-day Jammu and Billawar (Duggar Ilaga). Abhisara stretched between the Chenab and Jhelum; its ruler allied with Alexander to save the region from destruction. Today, this area is called Chibhal, encompassing Rajouri, Poonch, and Bhimber.

²*Madra* was an important tribe in Vedic times, which had carved out a state in Punjab and adjoining areas and had extended into the Plain areas of Jammu as well; therefore, at one time in the historical period, Jammu was a part of *Madradesh* (land of the *Madra* tribe).

³Lohri, a popular winter festival in Duggar and Punjab, marks the passing of the winter solstice. Celebrated with bonfires, offerings include roasted peanuts, *rewari* (jaggery-sesame toffees), *mulak*, corn, and rice, symbolising community and togetherness.

⁴Navratri, honoring the divine feminine, is observed twice annually in Chaitra (March–April) and Ashvin (September–October). Devotees fast and consume non-cereal foods such as *sabudana*, *singhaada atta*, *kattu atta*, and *samak rice*, enacting dietary discipline as spiritual cleansing.

⁵*Pugga Vrat* (Sankat Chauth), observed on the fourth day of Krishna Paksha in Magha (January–February), involves mothers fasting until moonrise. Ritual offerings of sesame–jaggery are divided between Ganesh, male deities, and female deities, enacted through boys and girls in the household.

⁶Ahoi Ashtami, observed on the eighth day of Krishna Paksha in Kartik, is a fast undertaken by women for the welfare and longevity of their children. The ritual begins early in the morning with a purifying bath, followed by the painting of Ahoi Mata with her cub on a clean wall. In contemporary practice, many families substitute this with printed calendars depicting the goddess. A mud or silver pot (*kalash*) filled with water, adorned with a sacred red thread (*moli*) around its neck, is placed beside the image. A separate glass of water is reserved for offering to the sun after the puja, symbolising devotion and cosmic balance.

⁷*Bacch Dua*, observed on the eleventh day of Krishna Paksha in Shravan (August–September), is a ritual among married women venerating the cow and her calf—symbols of agrarian sustenance and maternal continuity. The observance is performed collectively near water sources and accompanied by oral storytelling (*katha*) led by elder women. Ritual meals exclude cow's milk and wheat, a pedagogical abstention that transmits ecological and cultural values to younger women in the household. In urban contexts, symbolic replicas of the animals often substitute for live veneration, reflecting adaptation to changing environments.

⁸Baisakhi, locally known as Basoha in Dogra regions, heralds both the agricultural harvest and the onset of summer. Celebrated with riverside fairs that double as communal trade hubs and

cultural arenas, the festival foregrounds agrarian rhythms and regional conviviality. A distinctive local rite involves offering water to newborns for the first time, symbolising life's emergence and the season's regenerative blessings

⁹Amla Navami, observed on the ninth day of Shukla Paksha in Kartik (October–November), venerates the Amla tree, revered for its medicinal potency and sacred association with Lord Vishnu. Devotees fast and offer prayers beneath the tree, engaging in ritual puja to invoke blessings, health, and seasonal abundance.

Appendix I

Wild Edible Plants in Dogra Cuisine

Source: Field documentation and ethnobotanical surveys (Dar et al.; Goswami; Sharma, Wild Edible Plants; Sharma et al.; Om Prakash Sharma).

S.No	Botanical name	Local name	Part used	Edible use	Native place	Comments
1	<i>Acacia modesta</i> Wall	<i>Phulaigum/Palosa</i>	Gum	Fried with ghee and eaten	Nandini	Tonic, stimulant; cures dysentery, weakness
2	<i>Aegle marmelos</i> (L.) Correa	<i>Bill/Bael</i>	Fruit	Ripe fruits eaten raw and	Jammu Plains	Sharbet (cool drink) Vegetable
3	<i>Punica granatum</i> Linn.	<i>Dadim/Anaardana/</i> pomegranate	Seed	For Chutney/tangy sauces		
4	<i>Rubus ellipticus</i> Sm.	<i>Syari/golden</i> Himalayan raspberry	Fruit/ small apple kind	Raw/natural herbal medicine	Hilly regions	Juice treats fevers, gastric troubles, and cough
5	<i>Embllica officinalis</i> Gaertn.	<i>Amla</i> (Indian gooseberry)	Fruits	Pickle/chutney/raw	All over Jammu; available Nov–Mar	Rich in Vitamin C; antioxidant, anticancer, anti-inflammatory

S. No	Botanical name	Local name	Part used	Edible use	Native place	Comments
6	<i>Amaranthus viridis</i> Linn.	Charleri/ Jangali chaulai.	Leaves	Vegetable	Jammu plains	Nutritious
7	<i>Artocarpus lakoocha</i> Roxb	Teu/Dhau/ monkey jack	Fruit	Raw & pickle	Jammu plains	
8	<i>Bauhinia variegata</i> Linn	Kartrer/Kachnar	Bud	Vegetable	Original to Reasi & Rajouri; now cultivated widely	Used in curry, pickle, and stir-fried dishes
9	<i>B. lyceum</i> Royle	Kambel/Indian barberry	Fruit	Raw	Udhampur	Medicine, Fruit
10	<i>Caralluma tuberculata</i> N. E. Br.	Charungli	Tuber	Cooked& pickles	Sunderbani	headache, muscle spasms and rheumatism.
11	<i>Carissa opaca</i> Stapf. Ex Hains	Garna	Fruit	Raw,	Once a popular summer fruit, now scarcely available	Nutrient-dense, aiding digestion, urinary health, skin care, and diabetic ulcers

S. No	Botanical name	Local name	Part used	Edible use	Native place	Comments
12	<i>Chenopodium album</i> Linn	Bathu	Leaves	Vegetable	Jammu Plains	Consumed in winters; rich in iron, calcium, potassium, magnesium, and vitamins A, C, B6; regarded as a blood purifier
13	<i>Cordia dichotoma</i> Forst. F	LasooralIndian cherry	Fruit	Vegetable and pickle	Plains	
14	<i>Citrus Karna</i>	Kimb/Jimheeru	Fruit	Raw	Plains	Used as citrus rootstock; also a delicacy.
15	<i>Dioscorea belophylla</i> Volgt	Tarar/TarKand Pear leaved Yam	Bulb	Vegetable		Harvested around Shivratri in Shivkhori; now also found in Jammu.
16	<i>Dioscorea bulbefera</i> Linn	Tagald/Githi/pahari Aloo/air potatoes	Tuber	Vegetable	Krimchi	
17	<i>Diospyrus lotus</i> Linn	Maluk/date plum	Fruits	Raw	Ramban	It is used as dry fruit during the Lohri Festival

S. No	Botanical name	Local name	Part used	Edible use	Native place	Comments
18	<i>Diplazium esculentum</i> (Retz.) Sw.	Kasrod	Fronds	Vegetable/pickle	Hilly terrain	Rich in plant compounds, including vitamins A, B complex, and C
19	<i>Euphorbia royleana</i> Boiss.	Thor/cactus	Top tender portion of the stem	In yogurt		The young shoots are boiled, cut into small pieces, and added to yogurt to make raita
20	<i>Ficus auriculata</i> Lour.	Trimbal/Giant Indian fig	fruit	Raw	Mansar area	“Rich in calcium and minerals; given to lactating women to boost milk production
21	<i>Ficus palmate</i> Forsk.	Phagwar/Bhedu/wild Himalayan fig	Fig	Raw	Udhampur	
22	<i>Lactuca dolicophylla</i> Katam.	Gundhali/long leaved lettuce	leaves	Vegetable	Panchheri	
23	<i>Lopidium sativum</i> Linn.	Halayan/Halim/ garden cress	Young leaves	Vegetable	Mansar	Not native; introduced from outside

S. No	Botanical name	Local name	Part used	Edible use	Native place	Comments
24	<i>Malva parviflora</i> Linn	Swanchal/Sonchal/c heese weed	Leaves	Vegetable	Jammu	Contains vitamins A, B, C, E, plus insulin, mucilage, phenols, flavonoids, essential fatty acids, fiber, calcium, magnesium, and zinc.
25	<i>Marselia</i> <i>quadrifolia</i> Linn.	Chopatia/sushni/fou r-leaf clover	leaves	Vegetable	Mansar	anti-inflammatory, diuretic, depurative, febrifuge and refrigerant
26	<i>Momordica dioica</i> Roxb. Ex. Willd	Kakora/Dharkarela	fruit	Vegetable	Jammu, not much in use now	Helps neutralise free radicals, reducing oxidative stress and lowering risk of chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, and certain cancers
27	<i>Moringa oleifera</i> Lamk.	Sohanjna/Moringa/ Drumstick tree	fruit	Vegetable/Pickle/Raw	Ramnagar area, now at many places	antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties. people have used moringa for centuries due to its health benefits.

S. No	Botanical name	Local name	Part used	Edible use	Native place	Comments
28	<i>Morus alba</i> Linn.	Tut/Tull/white mulberry	Rhizomes	Raw	Udhampur	Rich in nutrients
29	<i>Nelumbo nucifera</i> Gaertn.	Kamal kakdi/sacred lotus	leaves	Vegetable	Kashmir	high in fibre and low in calories,
30	<i>Oxalis corniculata</i> Linn.	Ammikhati/ Amrul sak/Indian Sorrel	leaves	Used for making Chutney/Indian sauce	Udhampur	abundance of vitamin B1, calcium and iron in it
31	<i>Physalis peruviana</i> Linn.	Patakka/cape gooseberry	Fruit/grou nd cherry	Raw		blood-purifying capacity.
32	<i>Pinus roxburghii</i> Sarg.	Chir	seed	Raw		Roasted seeds can be eaten, and they are also a source of edible oil
33	<i>Zizyphus mauritianum</i> Lamk.	Ber	fruit	Raw the ripe fruit is dried and kept longer to be eaten later.	Abundanty found in Jammu	Rich in vitamins C, B, and minerals; tree provides fodder for goats and sheep, and nectar for honey bees.

S. No	Botanical name	Local name	Part used	Edible use	Native place	Comments
34	<i>Acacia catechu (L. f.) Willd</i>	<i>Katha</i>	Heartwood , branches	Tea		Used in paan; imparts red colour to saliva
35	<i>Polygonum amplexicaule Don</i>	<i>Mashleen/Amlī</i>	Roots	Tea	Udhampur	Dried roots for tea
36	<i>Portulaca oleracea Linn.</i>	<i>Loonki/Nunar/Kulfa/pur slane</i>	Leaves	vegetable		Leaves have a tangy taste; rich in vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants beneficial to health.
37	<i>Pueraria tuberosa DC.</i>	<i>Bidda/Biddsia/Indian kudzu</i>	Tuber	Raw/cooked		Rich in bioactive compounds (flavonoids, saponins, isoflavones); used as adaptogen and aphrodisiac, believed to enhance fertility. Also treats cough and lung disease
38	<i>Terminalia chebula</i>	<i>Harrad</i>	fruit	Powdered		treat various health problems such as cough, lung disease,

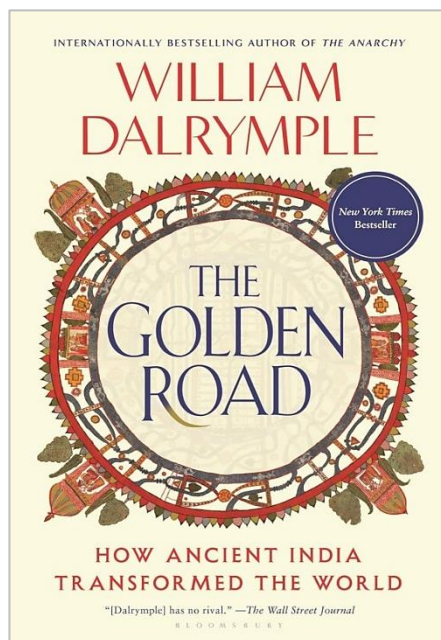
S. No	Botanical name	Local name	Part used	Edible use	Native place	Comments
39	<i>Rumex hastatus</i> <i>D. Don</i>	<i>Aula/Ambli/Abuj/</i> arrowleaf dock	Leaves	Vegetable	Udhampur	
40	<i>Sagittaria</i> <i>sagittifolia</i> Linn	<i>Tote/Arrowhead</i>	Tubers	Vegetables		
41	<i>Solanum</i> <i>nigrum</i> Linn	<i>Kainkothi</i>	leaves	Vegetables		Not much information is available
42	<i>Szygium</i> <i>cummini</i> (L) <i>Sheels</i>	<i>Jamoon</i>	fruit	Raw	Jammu plains	High in vitamin C for immune support; potassium content supports cardiovascular health.
43	<i>Terminalia</i> <i>bellerica</i> (Gaertn.) Roxb.	<i>Baira</i>	Seeds	Raw		
44	<i>Phoenix</i> <i>sylvestris</i> Roxb.	<i>Khajoor/silver date palm</i>	Fruit	Raw	Jungles of the Kandi (dry) belt, Jammu	Rich in iron, potassium, and minerals; fruit also contains vitamins A, B, sucrose, etc.

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Introduction

The historiographical intervention presented by William Dalrymple in recent work is essentially problematising the fixed accounts of the history of early Asian connectivity. The idea of the “Indosphere” presented by Dalrymple (326) directly challenges both Eurocentric ideas of a “Silk Road” and the previous orientalist scholarship on “Greater India”, which depicted Indian influence as imperial Tai-Li-Shek expansion. His theoretical framework contextualises the work within the discourse of post-colonial world-systems theory and the study of maritime history, claiming that a significant locus of cultural and economic interaction exists between 250 BCE and 1200 CE, located in the Indian communities. This sceptical preview asks whether the concept of the “Indosphere”, as put forward by Dalrymple, manages to reformulate the initial narratives of globalisation, or instead, replaces one model of civilisation centrism with another.



Conceptual Framework and Argumentation

The theoretical novelty of the Dalrymple the “Indosphere” project is an advanced conceptual tool that questions the perspectives of world-systems theory and models of historical cultural diffusion. His method combines both Braudelian *longue durée* with microhistorical case studies (Dalrymple 12), showing the way the Indian cultural, mathematical, and religious ideas spread outward via maritime networks instead of being oriented towards the usual directions of westward dissemination. For instance, the Nalanda monastery, which was an intellectual centre (monastery), displays how Dalrymple problematises centre-periphery frameworks by illustrating the flow of knowledge east as opposed to its

typical diffusion fashion towards the west (Dalrymple 11). This theoretical overhaul clearly shows the shortcomings of Eurocentric paradigms of history.

The methodological improvement of Dalrymple's fundamental strategy for addressing the epistemological issues brought up by balancing cultural agency with economic determinism is the subject of the epistemological nuances in his approach. In his view, the trade systems created but did not necessarily figure out how to transmit culture, so locals were actively involved in choosing and adapting Indian ideas rather than merely being in the receiving mode (Dalrymple 33). This nuanced realisation avoids the pitfalls of both the theory of economic reductionism and cultural imperialism. However, in the processes of cultural change, his framework occasionally fails to maintain a sound analytical balance between structural economic forces and individual agency.

Critical Methodology Analysis

Dalrymple's revisionist thesis is supported by evidence of the archaeological, epigraphic, and literary aspects of his interdisciplinary absorption; however, that approach raises the issue of selective interpretation. Favouring one type of source over another could lead to methodological blind spots, even though his blending of Sanskrit inscriptions, Chinese travels, and material culture creates an intriguing narrative pattern (Dalrymple 47). His theory of maritime trade is supported by archaeological discoveries in Oc Eo. However, the conclusions about the Sanskrit invasion of the culture in the rest of Southeast Asia are supported by epigraphic evidence. It is crucial to carefully evaluate whether the sources are trustworthy enough to support his lofty claims before incorporating these different types of evidence.

Dalrymple's heavy reliance on Chinese travel literature, particularly Xuanzang's observation from the seventh century, is enough evidence that it is not an interpretive restraint. The time compression of 1,450 years of intricate historical progress can cause the disappearance of significant periodical deviations and area distinctions (Dalrymple 12). The privileging of Sanskrit sources reproduces colonial-era beliefs in cultural superiority, even after he stated in effect that he does not endorse orientalist scholarship. Although the availability of the source can explain these methodological decisions, one must be particularly cautious regarding them in the context of his wider chronicle-of-historians intervention.

Deconstructing the “Silk Road” Paradigm

The critical history of the so-called “Silk Road” concept is scrupulously critiqued as Dalrymple examines the invention of the term given to it by Baron von Richthofen back in 1877. Dalrymple reveals that this alleged ancient trade route was a modern German colonial fantasy, which was aimed at promoting the construction of railroads between Berlin and Beijing (Dalrymple 456). In his critique, he demonstrates how the paradigm of the “Silk Road” obscured the centrality of India’s maritime by giving almost exclusive prominence to what were hardly land routes even in antiquity. This revisionist geopolitics intersects provocatively with the Belt and Road Initiative of China today, in which present-day infrastructure projects can be constructed on historically suspect premises.

The economic/cultural network analysis suggests that studying the maritime segment of the matter, as Dalrymple did, may sometimes be a hindrance, especially when it has to do with trade ties extending across the land. The case of Wu Zetian turning into a Buddhist empress after being called “Fifth Concubine” could, as an example, be summarised to show that the Chinese ideology of empire could be significantly redesigned with the influence of Indian religious ideologies (Dalrymple 212). However, it begs the question of whether this was due to political rather than cultural importation. His focus on sea routes, though compelling at times, undervalues the role of overland links in Central Asian situations. Such a simplistic perspective of the world in relation to the ancient trade is a dichotomy of sea and land networks.

Maritime Networks and Cultural Transmission

The economic determinism question in the Dalrymple analysis should be critically assessed to determine whether the trading networks he highlights sufficed in promoting patterns of cultural diffusion. His perspective of competitive business relationships as the element of religious and intellectual exchange (Dalrymple 17) demonstrates that his idea of the implementation of economic and cultural elements of ancient maritime networks in coming into view had a complicated nature. Nonetheless, a causal relationship between trade and cultural exchange is theorised inadequately, and Dalrymple sometimes even suggests that the transmission of culture was an automatic result of the existence of commercial relations. The evidence of ancient sites such as Mamallapuram and Oc Eo offers much material in his arguments regarding scales of maritime

connectivity. However, the correlation between economic transactions and cultural impact needs to be treated with more in-depth analysis.

The agency and reception relations are not appropriately explained in the Dalrymple approach, especially in terms of how local people negotiated and did not passively receive the forms of Indian culture. His analysis illustrates his sensitivity to selective cultural borrowing (Dalrymple 33), but does not formally elaborate on systematic theoretical means of comprehending reception procedures in various societies. The temporal nature of his 1,450-year chronological structure sometimes clouds major shifts in patterns of transmission, and there has not been enough emphasis on how political revolutions, innovations in technology and development of religious activity transformed the mechanisms of cultural exchange. These analytical limitations prevent a thorough understanding of the more complex processes underpinning India's cultures of influence in maritime Asia.

Mathematical and Scientific Knowledge Transfer

The methodology applied to the study of intellectual history developed by Dalrymple in the attempt at tracing the transmission of mathematical concepts across linguistic and cultural borders is his most compelling analytical success. These, and the various ways in which such concepts as *śūnya* evolved into Arabic *al-sifr* and in Latin *zephyr*, show great skill in the analysis of the study of translation and the intellectual diffusion process (Dalrymple 436). In his work, it could be dealt with much more rigorously. However, the example of the transmission of Indian numerals to Islamic Baghdad to medieval Italy via Fibonacci would provide the most compelling evidence on the Indian intellectual influence (Dalrymple 413), even though it is the format of transmission in which the mathematical concepts transformed rather than being transmitted as part of the process itself.

Theoretical Limitations and Counter-Arguments

Significant questions arise concerning the fact that, according to the overcorrection thesis, Dalrymple runs a danger of portraying India in a singularly exaggerated way in response to scholarly neglect in the past. His passionate promotion of Indian centrality is at times tipped toward the same Civilisational hubris that marred the earlier "Greater India" scholarship, but now with the inverted global orientation (Dalrymple 436). The cultural essentialism of his

concept of the “Indosphere” can have the perverse effect of reproducing the cultural insularity he is trying to dispute, by implicitly assuming that Indian civilisation is an exportable unit of Indian difference and contention. His typology has the danger of essentialising the “Indian” and also the “recipient” cultures. Therefore, this could mask the syncretic, hybrid character of cultural exchange processes, which his own findings often reveal.

The temporal determinism so prominent in the periodisation of Dalrymple, however, begs the question of whether his terminus of 1200 CE is ever ultimate or is convenient to his scholar. His claim that Mongol invasions by all means permeated the cultural influence of India (Dalrymple 39) simplifies the long and complicated history of political and cultural change that had long lasted since this arbitrary date. Competing accounts of the origin of early Asian trading networks by other scholarly traditions propose more polycentric concepts of cultural contact, where a multiplicity of origin and power centres was active at the same time, instead of the assumed India-centric pattern of diffusion proposed by Dalrymple. These conceptual restrictions have to be considered closely when it comes to the appraisal of his more general intervention in historiography.

Contemporary Relevance and Scholarly Impact

There is a provocative overlap between the geopolitical resonance of the historical revisionism of Dalrymple and the current Asian politics of power, which would give intellectual validity to the economies of scale that Rising India wants in the world, as a counterpoint to the rhetoric of Belt and Road created by China (Dalrymple 463). His scholarly intervention is an important example of decolonising Asian historiography for placing non-European agency at the forefront of dominant early world networks. However, the methodological novelty is not wholly replicative in the broad study of cultural transmission because of its extensive reliance on exceptional holdings in distinct geographical settings. The possibilities for historical implications of this restructuring of policy include how modern economies and foreign policy influence each other, because other forms of Asian connectionality suggest using a maritime approach rather than a continental one.

Conclusion

Dalrymple manages to showcase the role of India in the early world networks by adopting a complex interdisciplinary approach. However, other times, his analysis framework emphasises the centrality of India too much at the expense of agency held by the recipient cultures. His contribution to the study of history is so wildly successful that it manages to question not only Eurocentric or Sinocentric paradigms of history but also offers outstanding arguments in favour of the critical role of maritime trading networks in the cultural transmission process. The methodological innovations of the work represent effective models for continuing to study Asian culture and world history in the future, in spite of weaknesses in theoretical refinements related to cultural reception and transformation processes. The academic development will generate fruitful discussions of Asian early globalisation, where renewed scholars need to generate finer theoretical arguments to explain a range of cultural exchange processes in various societies and at different historical periods.

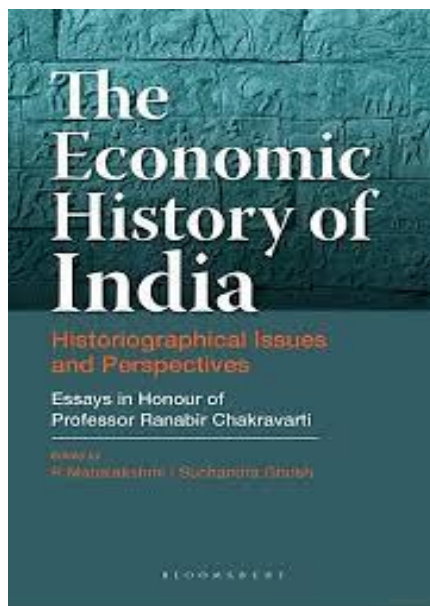


By Chayanika Samanta. She is a final-year postgraduate student in South and Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Calcutta.

R. Mahalakshmi & Suchandra Ghosh (eds.). *The Economic History of India: Historiographical Issues and Perspective Essays in Honour of Professor Ranabir Chakravarti*. Bloomsbury Academic India, 2023. 460 pp.

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Economic history, positioned between history and economics, has evolved through diverse approaches to better understand the complex and evolving history of India. In this context, Ranabir Chakravarti emerges as a pioneering scholar whose extensive work on economic and maritime history has significantly broadened our understanding of diverse notions of studying early Indian economic history. Influenced by mentors like B.N. Mukherjee and inspired by global scholarship on maritime history, Chakravarti combined his rigorous analysis of epigraphic, numismatics and textual sources to challenge established narratives of urban and trade decline and tried to explore beyond



landlocked society. This volume pays tribute to Ranabir Chakravarti's impactful scholarship on economic history, maritime trade networks, and merchant identities, which expanded our horizon of seeing economic history of early India beyond agrarian structures. Edited by two renowned scholars in this field, Prof. R Mahalakshmi and Prof. Suchandra Ghosh, this brings together contributions from distinguished scholars specialising in early India history.

The book has been arranged thematically around three themes of economic history: The first one focuses on *Trade, Traders and Maritime Networks*. The first chapter, '*Merchants, Artisans and the Political Processes in Central India (Gleanings from the Epigraphs of the Guptas and Their Subordinates)*' by Ashish Kumar focuses on Gupta and their sub-regional polities that reveals a nuanced transition where merchants and artisans began to assert socio-political relevance, challenging the earlier king-brāhmaṇa dominance through epigraphic evidence. This chapter highlights the rise of merchants and artisans, mobility of traders and their evolving identities. The epigraphic evidence highlighted the mobility of traders from Vidiśā in the early centuries of the Common Era, noting their

participation in both overland and overseas trade networks (p. 17). Ashish Kumar points out migration of the silk weaving community from Lāta to Daśapura, was not only the male workers moving for the livelihood but involved entire families, including woman and children, all engaged in silk weaving (p.20). This reflects both spatial and occupational mobility, which was encouraged by the local rulers. This chapter significantly points out how peripheral zones were integrated into expanding networks of trade, craft production and political power.

‘*Vaṇikas and Śreṣṭhīs in Odisha from the Epigraphic Perspective (6th to 14th Centuries)*’ written by Sabarni Pramanik Nayak is the Second Chapter of this book, which slightly resembles the first chapter, focuses on the nuanced hierarchy and occupational identity and mobility within Odisha’s merchant community between 6th and 14th centuries. She defined the fluidity and complexity of merchant-artisan identities like *vaṇikas*, *śreṣṭhis*, *puraśreṣṭhis* and *utkīrṇa* (engravers) which often blurs the lines between trade, craft and bureaucracy. One interesting highlight of her chapter is that it showcases a social mobility and transition of a particular community *mālākāra* (supplier of garlands) to *mālākāra śreṣṭhin* (p.41). Both the chapters demonstrate that these groups were neither homogenous nor static, but instead shaped by temporal and spatial dynamisms, and evolving with their own identities.

Y. Subbarayalu argues that the *Ainūrūvar* was not a separate or centralised itinerant guild as previously assumed by scholars, but rather a flexible network of local merchant communities based in various commercial centres, especially those based in nagarams, in the third chapter entitled, ‘*Nagaram and Ainūrūvar: A Reconsideration of Their Relations*’. By epigraphic analysis of early medieval South Indian inscriptions like Paṭṭanapakuti and Pirānmalai (p.55), he shows that *Ainūrūvar* was a coalition of merchants from different places who used a shared identity, religious affiliation, and trade ethics to cooperate across regions.

Chapter Four ‘*Salt in Early India: A Socioeconomic Appraisal*’ by Susmita Basu Majumdar and Chapter Five ‘*Drugs and Potions: Exploring the Early History of Medicine in India from an Economic History Perspective*’ by Nupur Dasgupta, share a common focus on the socio-economic aspects of essential commodities in Early India. Through diverse research approaches, Susmita Basu Majumdar reveals how salt, an everyday commodity, became a crucial strategic resource for the state. Highlighting textual source like *Arthaśāstra*, she mentioned strict state regulation of salt production under *Ākarādhyakṣa*, who enforced penalties for

digging salt without permission (p.66). Nupur Dasgupta on the other hand argues that in early India, medicine was not just a product or a healing practice, but a deeply embedded economic activity shaped by social and political structures. Tracing evidences from two medical compendia *Caraka* and *Suśruta Samhitās*, inscriptions and Fa Xian's travel accounts, she pointed out an interesting aspect which is the importance and role of consumers. Through the rise of physicians, a clear relation was built between physicians, patrons of medical institutions, and patients. Tracing evidence from *Arthaśāstra*, she states that *Surādhyakṣa*, a state officials used to regulated the production and sale of the products with fixed pricing across regions (p.91). The overlapping roles of producers and merchants reflect the fluid nature of economic activities in this chapter.

In the Chapter Six, '*Exchanging Coins at Barygaza, Periplus 49 and Devaluation of Kārṣāpaṇa*', Federico de Romanis debunks earlier scholarly interpretations through a critical examination of epigraphic and textual sources from early India. He highlights that the Roman silver denarii were profitably exchanged at the Western port of Barygaza due to a more favorable gold-silver ratio in India, the strong reputation of the Roman coinage and the undervaluation of the local punch-marked coins (p.112). He clearly points out that this exchange allowed Roman merchants to gain modest profits without relying solely on commodity trade, and it had lasting impacts on regional monetary systems.

Elizabeth Lambourn brings a fresh perspective and a new style of writing in economic history by emphasising that shopping among 12th century Jewish merchants in the Indian Ocean was not merely a commercial activity, but a crucial aspect of sustaining business relationships, domestic life, and cultural identity in her chapter entitled, '*No important and No value? Geniza Sources on Personal Shopping and the 'Economy of Reward'*'. Using Geniza documents, especially the letters of Abraham Ben Yiju, she shows how 'shopping' for business partners was a form of *ṣuḥba* (reciprocal agency), where providing household items was an expected service, not a personal favour. Drawing on Avner Offer's concept of the 'economy of regard', she highlights important human emotions like trust, respect and reputation were also exchanged as a part of everyday commercial activity (p.123).

Angela Schottenhammer's chapter '*Insights into Global Maritime Trade around 1600*' highlights how daily life, health, and commerce were deeply

embedded in the exploitative structures of colonial expansion. She examines the presence of a ship surgeon with medical texts, cooking tools, and goods like Chinese ceramics and containers, showing how deeply trade, war, and daily life were connected. The interesting part of this chapter is that the ship's surgeon was not only a healer, but also actively took part in trade, and in handling goods from Chinese traders, known as Sangleys, in Manila (p.168).

The second major theme of the book explores early Indian economic history with a particular focus on land grants, agricultural production, and the dynamisms of the state. Chapter Nine '*What is an Early Historic Land-Grant? Economics, Diplomats and an Indian Epigraphic Form*' written by Meera Visvanathan, focuses on a fresh perspective to read and interpret the actual definition of land grants of early India. It debunks the old notion that all ancient inscription referring to land donations qualify as land-grants. Instead of assuming all land related inscriptions are land-grants, she highlights that early records must be analysed for four key elements: Land as a gift, a donor with political authority, a donee, and fiscal or administrative exemptions (p.207). Using comparative epigraphic analysis, she points out that Gotamīputa Sātakaṇi's Nasik inscription, one of the early inscriptions, includes all these elements.

Shyam Narayan Lal argues that land transfers in early medieval India, particularly under different branches of Rāṣṭrakūṭas by examining their inscriptions, reveal a complex relationship between rural society and state power which challenges the older views that treated village as isolated or merely tax-producing units (p.232), in the Tenth Chapter titled '*The State, Village Communities and the Agrarian Order in Early Medieval Western Deccan.*' Dev Kumar Jhanjh in his chapter entitled, '*Political Economy in the Hill States of Bramhapura-Kārttikeyapura in Central Himalaya (c. 6th- 10th centuries CE)*'. It demonstrates that the region's economy in the early medieval period was not only active but strategically positioned, with trade, craft production, and state mechanisms, contrary to earlier notion of economic decline in this period. Drawing on epigraphic evidences and textual sources like *Arthaśāstra*, it reveals that this region had an extensive mining economy, notably copper, with the term *ākara*, possibly reflected in place names like Agor (p.269), and state-supervised industrial centres called *karmamānta* engaged in varied activities such as metallurgy, slaughterhouses, and turmeric processing (*tungula karmamānta*) (p.270). The region's integration into the *Uttarāpatha* trade network (p.272)

connected it to the Gangetic plain and northwest India, highlighting the importance of high-value trade.

'Agrarian Expansion, Irrigation and Trade in Agrarian Commodities in Early Medieval Karnataka' is the twelfth chapter of this book, written by Malini Adiga. She argues that from the mid-4th century onwards, Karnataka saw a systematic agrarian expansion led by ruling elites, Brāhmaṇas and local notables through the construction of irrigation works (p.282), especially tanks, dams, and water-lifting devices like *aravaṇṭige*. By examining epigraphic records from various regions of Karnataka highlights how these irrigation systems contributed to the development of new settlements and strengthened agrarian and temple-based economy.

The third theme focusing on Settlements, Landscapes and Regional Formations, begins with V. Selvakumar's chapter *'Early Historic Landscapes of the Periyar and Vaigai valleys in South India and the Afro-Eurasian-Indian Ocean World Interactions'*, which explores the cultural and economic development of early historic Tamilakam, and challenges the previous view of 'urban decline' of this region. Using a landscape archaeological approach, epigraphic data and textual sources, he shows how settlements evolved through local resources, agro-pastoral activity, and exchange with global trade networks. He mentions that the site of Paṭṭaṇam in the *Periyar* valley witnessed the megalithic burials, Roman coins and local Cēra coins (p.339), showing how a small port town was both rooted in local traditions and deeply connected to global trade network.

The Fourteenth Chapter *'Barygaza/Bharukaccha: A Long-Range History of the Port'* by Suchandra Ghosh, explores the Barygaza (ancient Bharukaccha) as a vital port city deeply embedded in extensive maritime and inland trade networks from at least the early centuries BCE, which is less explored. Using *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, epigraphical evidences, and Buddhist narratives, she argues that the port facilitated the flow of goods, people and ideas between the regions of Indian subcontinent and the ancient world, and making it a central node in early India's economic and maritime history. Interestingly, epigraphic evidences found from Socotra (p.378) illustrates the presence of active maritime community linked to Barygaza highlighting the port's involvement in long-distance sea routes and cultural exchanges.

In the next chapter, *'Reading the Multilayered Material Culture through Artefacts from Hathab, Gujarat (4th century BCE to the 6th century CE)'*

Krishnendu Ray discusses that Hathab was more than just a settlement; it was vibrant, interconnected community where people's skills, cultural beliefs and practical needs shaped a rich material culture. Excavations at Hathab have revealed hearth with charcoal and ash, along with scattered shell pieces, indicating the presence of skilled artisans crafting both iron and shell objects for local and long-distance trade (p.398).

The last chapter entitled '*Contextualising Samatāta-Harikela in Their Political and Economic Scenario and Exchange Relations with Kāmarūpa and China*' by Priyam Barooah, explores the trade dynamisms of Samatāta-Harikela region, which became a key maritime hub connecting South Asia and Southeast Asia. This chapter particularly focuses on the procurement of the gold (p.405); a precious metal not found locally in the delta. To obtain gold, these regions relied on trade connections with neighbouring areas such as Kāmarūpa, and possibly Tibet or Nepal.

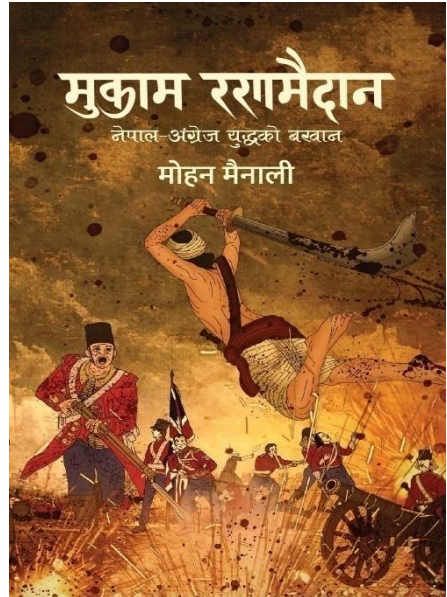
All these chapters, written by distinguished scholars, collectively weave a fresh and nuanced perspective on the economic history of early India, challenging the previous notions of decline in trade and urbanisation during early historic to early medieval period. These studies reveal vibrant, dynamic, and interconnected economic systems flourishing across regions from Central India to Eastern part of India, from South India to Himalayan regions. A key theme running through the chapters is the significant mobility of merchants, artisans, craft communities, who travelled widely both overland and maritime routes, facilitating the exchange of commodities, ideas, and cultural practices. These contributions enrich our understanding of the evolving history of early Indian subcontinent. Each chapter highlights both the continuity and change in economic practices, showing that economic history of early India is marked by resilience, interconnectedness and enduring vitality, not decline.



By Titas Sarkar. She is a Third Year Doctoral Research Scholar at the Department of History, School of Social Sciences, University of Hyderabad.

Mohan Mainali. *Mukam Ranamaidan*. BookHill Publishers, 2023. 280 pp.
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Mohan Mainali's *Mukam Ranamaidan* allows one to understand the pain of war. During war time, some rules are established or followed. It is difficult to predict how a war will start—by which subject or how—and similarly, it is uncertain until the last moment how much damage will be caused. Just as East India Company Commander Ochterlony told Chandrashekhar in Hetauda, what is accepted today may be unacceptable tomorrow. Every moment and strategy is crucial during war, and fighters battle solely to win. In the book *Mukam Ranamaidan*, written and published by investigative journalist Mohan Mainali, the accounts of the Anglo-Nepalese war (1814-1816) are described in detail.



The Treaty of Sugauli was signed by between British India and Kingdom of Nepal. The representatives for Nepal were Chandra Shekhar Upadhyaya and Pandit Gajraj Mishra. The signatory for Nepal was Raj Guru Gajraj Mishra aided by Chandra shekher Upadhaya the signatory for the Company was Lieutenant Colonel Paris Bradsaw.

The Sugauli Treaty, signed by Colonel Paris Bradshaw with Nepal, resulted in Nepal losing territories west of the Mahakali and east of the Mechi rivers to British control. The treaty required Nepal to accept British decisions, employ British, European, or American citizens without British permission, and exchange ambassadors between the two countries. Despite this, Nepal considered fighting the British again, leading to a declaration of a new war. The book also reveals that Nepalis were clever in preparing for another war but Commander Ochterlony reached with their army near Kathmandu.

This book details the military events from the battle that began in Nalapani on October 1814, and ended on March 1816, in Makwanpur. It presents the events in simple language, combining old correspondence with contemporary

usage. After the British army reached Kathmandu, the Sugauli Treaty was signed, under which Nepal had to be satisfied with a smaller territory than present-day. The British felt they had done injustice to Nepal by forcing the Sugauli Treaty, and to console the Gorkha army, they provided two Lakhs of rupees annually as compensation. Article 4 of the Treaty stipulated that the British would settle pensions for chiefs selected by the Raj of Nepal. The British returned Tarai land to Rapti twice, recognising Nepal's dissatisfaction with the treaty. A year after the war ended, with British help to crush the territories from Koshi to Rapti and later to suppress the Lucknow rebellion, the new territory that Nepal gained helped define its current geographical boundaries.

The primary source of this book is letters exchanged between those deployed on the warfront and those involved elsewhere. James Bailey Fraser's "The Kukuri Breves" also verifies that the account of Kirti Rana differs slightly and has been openly checked. Similarly, in relation to Balabhadra Kunwar, the book discusses activities between the Battle of Nalapani and the recruitment of Ranjit Singh's army at Lahor during the interim period.

After the sugauli treaty Nepal became landlocked, deprived of access to the sea. The war also resulted in the loss of many heroes, including Bhakti Thapa and Hasti Dal Shah, and a significant financial burden for the country.

Some of Nepalese troops were dissatisfied with the Sugauli Treaty, leading many to leave for foreign army employment. Many Nepalese ex-armies, including the commander of the Nalapani battle, left Nepal for foreign army employment, resulting in the recruitment of Nepalese youths in the British Indian Army. The war also led to a loss of trade with Tibet, as British India began trade with Tibet after capturing Kumaon and Sikkim, resulting in a significant economic loss for Nepal.

The description of events where kings, rajas, zamindars, soldiers, and others sided with the more powerful parties is detailed. Before the Sugauli Treaty, the agreement to return from Kumaon and Mahakali opposite side accounted for the loss of Gorkhali-controlled land and revenue. The loss of all land via Mahakali resulted in a revenue loss of 1.66 million rupees.

The book clearly explains the harsh treatment the state inflicted on commanders who lost territory and income. While successful commanders received prize, their struggles due to hunger and lack of weapons were ignored. It

vividly describes the hardships faced by soldiers' families and the fallen during the war, bringing the narrative to life. Most likely, during this war, both sides looted the wealth and cattle of the citizens living in the areas they occupied. Dissatisfied with this, they set fire to shacks and houses. Both armies carried away loot when they retreated. To escape death, these citizens became nomadic. Conversely, as hunger and shortages increased, some became mercenaries. That is why looting was often written in this book.

Though the struggles of soldiers and their families are depicted, the letters reveal that the main concern among civilians was about which local kings or zamindar switched sides during the war. Correspondence from the battlefield shows internal disagreements among Gorkhali soldiers—including Shah, Thapa, Kunwar—and the resulting consequences are discussed in the book. In that era, within the Gorkha state, a system of punishments based on caste was practiced; attacks based on auspicious timings and traditional medical practices were common in warfare. The British army, however, had modern medicine and separate water vessels for British, Muslim, and Hindu soldiers. Wounded soldiers treated in their camps often switched sides, as shown in the book.

British soldiers knew that fighting in the mountains during the rainy seasons was extremely difficult. The Nepalese side, therefore, saw this as a preparation for war. The “Chaturmas” refers to the seasonal period from July to October. During the four months from Devshayani or Harishyani Ekadashi in July to Prabodhini Ekadashi in October, it was believed that no auspicious work should be undertaken, making warfare in that period hesitant. Both sides exploited propaganda heavily on the battlefield, to either entice China or threaten the British. The British also used propaganda effectively.

Music and entertainment teams such as nurses, drummers, flute players certainly played roles during the war. Commanders and soldiers defending every Gadhi (fortress), all have their stories. These forts and fortresses are witnesses to the Anglo-Nepalese War. To identify the battlefield, the river areas, forts, and castles are important. Looking at the battle zones, they spanned across the regions beyond the Mechi River, from the Mechi to the Koshi River, from the Kosi to the Narayani River, from Narayani to Rapti, and beyond Rapti to Kali and Mahakali. Both sides' attention was mainly directed towards the areas across Mahakali and between Kosi and Narayani Rivers.

To understand the Persian love of the British, further study is needed. I need to investigate why Major General Ochterlony attempted to prepare treaties in Persian with Budakaji Amarsingh Thapa. Later, the treaty was translated into Hindi. How behavior during warfare changes in the battlefield is noteworthy. For instance, Prithivnarayan Shah defeated the last king of Bhaktapur, Mitbabu (Friends father) Ranjit Malla, and similarly, the story of Thapa's son Mitbabu Ochterlony losing is interestingly described in the book. The current geographical condition of each battlefield or fort is somewhat clear, but this is not enough. An updated edition should include provinces and districts, covering all the fortresses and regions where battles occurred. It is also difficult to determine the exact number of human casualties or wounded on both sides. There is mention that when Nepalese sent a letter to the Chinese emperor, about 20,000 British soldiers lost their lives. It is also stated that the British spent over 5 million rupees in two phases for the war. During the Anglo-Nepalese War (1814-1816), East India Company had recruitment "Burcandos". It refers a type of soldier, who masked head and face with black cloth.

In my view, the then-used gold rupees were called "Asarfi." It would have been better if the author had included estimated figures where exact figures are not given. More research is needed on how much Nepal spent on the war. At that time, commanders had to raise armies through land and harvest income. After the war ended, orders were given to account for all revenue from their command areas. Understanding which side's kings, zamindars, wazirs, landowners, or merchants spent how much money on the war is an ongoing task. Although the war may have ended, doubts remain so it seems that the suspicion in the minds of Nepal's has not yet been completely eradicated.

After studying the book, it is clear that the oral histories of citizens living in the battlefield or Terai, who would dig holes beneath the ground to save their lives. It must be recorded to preserve their stories. There is no doubt that reading *Mukam Ranamaidan* will provide new information. Every resident of Nepali Diasporas can deepen their knowledge of the battlefield forts and castles in their areas after thorough study.

The 280-page book includes maps of the Anglo-Nepalese war and contains 30 chapters, including the author's note, clarifications, appendices and an index. Mohan Mainali's book *Mukam Ranamaidan* has won the Madan Puraskar for 2080 BS from Madan Puraskar Guthi. The prize amount for the awards was Four lakh rupees. The Madan Award was established in memory of Madan Shamsheer

Rana and inaugurated by Queen Jagadamba in 1955. The first announcement of the Madan Award was made in 2056, and the award ceremony was completed in 1957. The initial award amount was Rs. 4,000, but it has been increased to four lakh rupees. The 'Madan Award' is a prize awarded annually to one of the outstanding works published in the Nepali language within the year. The 'Jagadamba-Shri' Award is given to individuals or organisations that have made significant contributions in various fields such as Nepali language, culture, and literature.



By Rakesh Prasad Chaudhary. He is a Nepal-based independent journalist, writer, and reviewer whose work focuses on investigative and in-depth reporting, book and article writing, and reviews for more than 25 years.

A Heart Outside the Heart: Japanese Sensibilities and Aesthetic Simplicity in Rabindranath Tagore's Santiniketan

An interview with Nilanjan Bandopadhyay

Nilanjan Bandyopadhyay (b. 1974) is a poet, calligrapher, tea-artist, and cultural figure from Santiniketan, West Bengal, India. He is a special officer at Rabindra Bhavan, Visva Bharati University. Educated at Visva-Bharati of India and Reitaku University of Japan, he was deeply influenced by Japanese aesthetics, especially Shodo (the way of calligraphy), he blends the spirit of Asian artistic traditions with Bengali script and poetry. His calligraphy experiments explore cursive, flowing forms of Bengali letters inspired by Japanese brushwork, often presented alongside his short, evocative poems. Bandyopadhyay's home-studio Kokoro—meaning 'heart, mind, spirit' in Japanese—reflects his lifelong dialogue with Japan and his minimalist, meditative philosophy of art. He is also the creator of Bodhi-Cha, an Indian tea ceremony that fuses elements of tea practices from India, China, Japan, and Korea, emphasising harmony, mindfulness, and cultural synthesis. His exhibitions, such as Poetry and Calligraphy at MAYA Art Space and solo shows at the Indian Museum, Kolkata, have displayed his black-and-white calligraphic works paired with poems, while his book *Bhalobashar Mato* (Seems Like Love) combines his poetic sensibility with his visual art. A Charles Wallace Scholar, he was trained as a curator by the British Museum, UK.

Despite being diagnosed with Medullary Thyroid Cancer for more than 26 years, Bandopadhyay continues to work on his ambitions relentlessly as he tries to create magic through his love for his own language and Japan. Currently associated with Rabindra Bhavana in Santiniketan, Bandyopadhyay practices the aesthetics of impermanence, incompleteness, and silence—values aligned with the Japanese philosophy of wabi-sabi. By merging Bengali literary tradition with Asian artistic forms, he has carved a unique space in contemporary Indian art.



Nilanjan Bandyopadhyay at Kokoro

Interviewed by Subhadeep Ganguly and the interview process was assisted by Apurbaa Basu

Nilanjan Bandyopadhyay, a poet and calligrapher, views haiku not through its rigid 5-7-5 syllabic structure but as an expression of its core ‘spirit or soul’. He believes a poem should be like a ‘saturated substance’, with all excess removed until it is complete. This perspective extends to his use of seasonal elements, which he finds deeply integrated into Japanese culture but often feels unnecessary to force into his poems to conform to the form. For him, poetry is a humanistic act, focused on ‘humanity and human connection’ and promoting ‘good taste,’ rather than addressing contemporary political issues. He finds inspiration in mundane objects, seeing them as a way to *supernaturalise the natural* and foster empathy.

Bandyopadhyay's artistic philosophy is deeply influenced by the Japanese concept of *wabi-sabi*, an aesthetic that finds beauty in *impermanence, incompleteness, and silence*. Introduced to this idea during a translation project, he has since adopted it as a minimalist and meditative approach to his work. This blend of cultures is a core theme in his art. While he acknowledges that a full

assimilation of Japanese culture is impossible, he creates a unique dialogue between his Bengali heritage and Japanese aesthetics. His home-studio, named *Kokoro* (Japanese for "heart, mind, spirit"), is an homage to Rabindranath Tagore's own admiration for Japanese culture. Furthermore, his creation of



Bodhi-Cha, a tea ceremony that synthesises practices from various Asian countries, highlights his commitment to cultural harmony.

This synthesis is also evident in his calligraphy. Inspired by Shodo, the Japanese way of calligraphy, Bandyopadhyay developed his own flowing, cursive Bengali script. While not always

easily legible, it is his attempt to 'decorate' the beauty of his mother tongue. To expand the reach of his art, he has also begun working with the ancient Brahmi script, which he believes gives his work a 'pan-Indian presence' and allows him to explore the 'idea of India' through concepts like humility and non-violence.

In this interview we have tried to identify the Japanese soul of *Kokoro* in an Indian context through the main facets by which the philosophies themselves are shaped. *Kokoro* and Nilanjan Bandopadhyay stand as a prime example of two South Asian philosophies merging together peacefully, becoming one and how we can learn from each other and adapt to each other. We're reminded of Japanese cedar (*Cryptomeria japonica*) which, though originated in Japan, has grown and acclimatised in Darjeeling and has claimed Darjeeling as its very own. Japanese Cedar or Dhupi trees are a reminder of *Kokoro* itself, which although originates in Japan but has made its rooted mark in our tradition and culture.

We go inside *kokoro* (Japanese word, meaning 'heart') and there we are welcomed by various small plants that hold us in peace and tranquillity. As we sit down in a Japanese built house, in a low chair, Nilanjan Sir offers us tea. He talks

about how Japanese people prefer to live not in recluse but rather in a slight forced hardship. Then we slowly talk about his recent PhD thesis that he completed amidst his falling health on Tagore and his relations with Japan.

Subhadeep: We came to know about your recent PhD thesis defence. Can you tell us a bit about that and Tagore's relation to Japan and its philosophies? And your journey to Japan?

Nilanjan Bandopadhyay: My PhD thesis is not very complicated. It's a compilation and reflection of the years Tagore spent in Japan. It's not an extraordinary work. Works on such topics have already been done. I plan to enlarge the body of work through some publications of my own. Tagore had a long-standing relationship with Okakura, who was at the front and center of the Indo-Japan relationship. He tried to incorporate Indian philosophy with a Japanese sense of aesthetics. Tagore was also moved by the haiku especially of Basho. He was also fond of Japanese art and aesthetics. He even wanted to transport a Japanese house to Santiniketan by ship. Although it never came to fruition. Since Japan is prone to earthquakes, their houses are built such that they can be easily transported.

I was influenced by Kazuo Azuma. Azuma sensei was a Professor of Reitaku University who came to Visva Bharati for some translation. I was assigned to help him in his translation process. It was through him that I came to know about the Japanese aesthetic sense and its simple pleasures and also concepts like *wabi-sabi*.

Subhadeep: So, this idea of Tagore is the basis of the very house of *Kokoro*?

Nilanjan Bandopadhyay: You can say that. Though Tagore never thought of building a house with Japanese sensibilities, I'd think that that would be the ideal way to bring forth 'Japanness' here. I'm not trying to copy Japan or to propagate Japanese ideals. What I am simply trying to do is for my own aesthetic sensibilities. Bringing forth 'Japanness' is also quite impossible because how we see certain things like seasons among other things is quite different from how Japanese people perceive things.

Subhadeep: You mentioned seasons, and that reminded me of the poem *Akam*. In that poem, too, there are indications of the seasons through things like flowers or through the very subject of the poem. Since Japanese and Bengali are entirely different languages, when Rabindranath Tagore and Nabanita Dev Sen translated haiku, did they try to maintain that "jolt"? In modern haiku, which is increasingly written in free verse, is a new form of haiku emerging in the Bengali language and script?



Nilanjan Bandopadhyay: I don't know about a new form. But I'll say it again, when I write these small poems, the idea is more important to me. I'm an idea-driven person. I feel that the spirit or soul of a thing appeals to me much more than its technical formalities, difficulties, or requirements.

When translating, it is definitely necessary to preserve the original sentiment, the impact, and the seasonal elements of a haiku. However, the way seasons are celebrated in Japan is completely different from here [in Bengal]. There is a concept called *Setsu Getsu Kawa* (seasons, months, flowers, and the moon), which are deeply ingrained in Japanese culture and appear in everything.

In Japan, even a family's chopsticks, a person's clothes, household curtains, and tableware all change with the seasons. Their connection to the seasons is that intimate. We, however, did not grow up with the seasons in the same way. Our Bengali six seasons are not connected to our lives in the same way a Japanese person has managed to connect with them. Naturally, the influence of seasons is very different there, and it has almost no similarity with our culture. That's why I've never felt the need to force a seasonal element into a haiku just to signify winter. If I feel that for the purpose of writing a particular poem, I need to introduce something that signifies monsoon or winter, that's a different matter. But I never felt that to make a poem a haiku or to make it equal to haikus written by foreigners, I have to go through an imagined hardship to confine myself to a form or to select certain words. It always seemed insignificant to me. What's truly important is the concept—the idea. That is, what do I want to convey, and how humanistic is it?

I believe my poetry mostly deals with humanity and human connection. I don't often write about violence or very contemporary issues in my haikus. Unfortunately, I can't write about rape, political agitation, or discrimination. I can't because I feel this form is not appropriate for such topics. I believe I want to write poems that do not create these kinds of situations. I want to promote good taste and humanity by creating an environment where such incidents would never happen. I consider this to be a kind of work in itself.

There is great sensitivity in haiku poetry. I can tell you a small story: a new student of Matsuo Basho once came to him very excited, with a poem he had written. The poem was about a red dragonfly with its wing torn off, which he compared to a chili pepper. Basho didn't say anything; he didn't comment on the violence or inhumanity. Instead, he wrote another poem for the student in his notebook:

*Red chili pepper,
with wings attached, a dragonfly.*

This difference and this sensitivity are what we can expect from a poet. For me, this lesson from Matsuo Basho is far more important than conforming to the traditional 5-7-5 syllabic pattern of a Japanese haiku.

My poetry contains a great deal of nature, a sense of the world, and an attention to small animals or creatures. It has a kind of melancholy and empathy, which is also present in haiku.

Subhadeep: So, if I were to say that a characteristic of haiku is to present ordinary things in an extraordinary way, would that be correct?

Nilanjan Bandopadhyay: Yes, certainly. That is, of course, a part of any great art. The saying to *supernaturalise the natural* is true. We often don't think about how a small thing can be so profound and expand our thoughts.

I was walking on the road one day and saw a leaf fluttering with two holes in it. I turned the leaf over and saw an insect underneath it. It occurred to me that for the tiny insect covered by the leaf, it was both a huge roof and a massive obstacle. But through the two holes, the insect had "two skies". This might not be a grand, magnificent thought, but I felt that it's a very positive one, full of hope and the chance to overcome an obstacle.



Another time, I came outside on a winter day and saw a spider's web. A very dejected spider sat in the middle, having failed to catch any insects all day despite its efforts. The web, however, had caught many small drops of dew. I wrote a poem about it, saying that the spider set a web and only caught dew, nothing else. This isn't a great thought that could change the world. But the fact that a question arose in my mind about the helplessness and sadness of a small creature might help me deal with a fellow human being in distress. If I can think that way about an insect, I can certainly think the same way about a suffering, helpless person. That's what I believe, and that is their significance. It's not that I want to bring in some extraordinary ideas. It's purely a practice of my own life, and if it helps to bring a thought to someone else's mind through poetry, then it must have some value.

Subhadeep: When one thinks of Japan nowadays, things like manga or anime come to mind. But I haven't found much discussion about tragic writers like Shanku Ghosh's Asamudajai, or even Kawabata or Yukio Mishima. In this context, where do you think haiku or overall Japanese literature stands?

Nilanjan Bandopadhyay: It's not that we can read many Japanese haikus. There are many translations into English, but very few direct translations from Japanese. In many cases, if a poet translates, it's more effective than a general linguist's translation, which can be dry and watery. The Japanese language is very difficult, so there aren't many translations. Now, though, many are being done. At Jadavpur University, Abhijit Da is translating a lot of Murakami. Now, many people are doing direct translations from Japan, which is very good. But there are a lot of haiku translations available in English by very famous people who knew the Japanese language well and translated them. I haven't studied Japanese in that way; I only have a very basic idea of the language. When I have done some translations, I have taken help from others where I got stuck. But because I have a long history of connection with Japan, I have been able to grasp that spirit.

I used to think that the "auditory sensibility" of our Bengali poetry was not made for very short poems. Rabindranath Tagore said this repeatedly, which is why many criticised the poems in *Gitanjali* for being so short. He showed that something so brief could be so powerful.

Tagore repeatedly said something very important about Japan's national character, not just its poetry but its overall way of life: "There is a great passion in Japan which is always under great control". This great passion under great control is a part of the Japanese national character. We see this reflected in their haiku, their paintings, their minimalism, their garden art, their flower arrangements, and everything else.

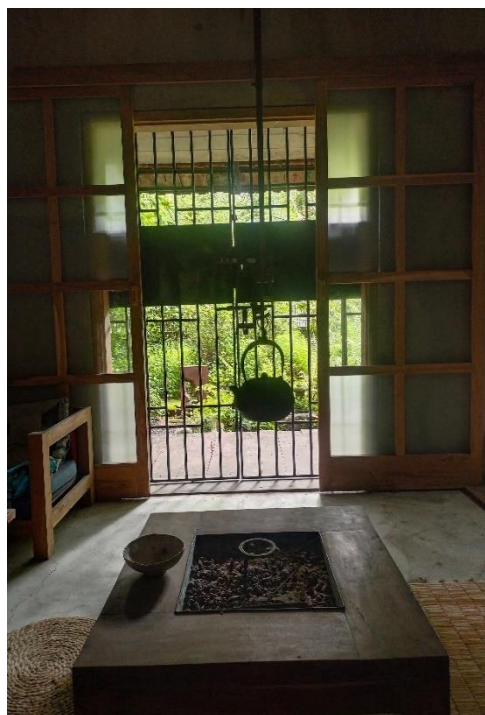
In contrast, with this passion, we don't know where to stop. The ability to stop is very important, and since haiku is so short, it's even more crucial to know where to stop. My mind might come up with many things for a poem, but I can make it very brief. I don't know if you've done this, but when we were kids, we used to make glue from flour. You keep mixing flour and water until it becomes a sticky substance, and you can't mix it any further. It becomes saturated. Haiku poetry is like that. As its excess is removed, it reaches a point where you feel there's nothing left. From there, you can neither go backward nor forward. When a haiku can reach such a place, I feel good writing it. That's why I have rarely

gone back to my own haikus. It's very rare, but sometimes I have cut and removed a whole line, making it even shorter, and that's how my haiku writing has progressed.

I might write one haiku in three or six months. The problem is, the moments for this kind of poetry are so beautiful, and since it becomes a part of one's life, I feel that everything I see is a poem. Everything is a haiku. I even had a poem about this: "I have gotten into such trouble trying to be a poet, that everything I see feels like a poem, and it doesn't let me sleep, doesn't let me sit; it keeps me busy all the time". I have no free time. The call of a small bird, the movement of an insect, the death of a termite, a drop of dew—in everything, I feel there's a moment of poetry hidden. It might be very ordinary, but the extraordinary within it elevates our minds to a spiritual height. And I feel that for me, haiku is the primary medium to express this feeling.

Subhadeep: Is calligraphy also a similar subject?

Nilanjan Bandopadhyay: Yes, I was also inspired by calligraphy after seeing it in Japan. The form of black and white always attracted me greatly, primarily after I saw so much calligraphy in Japan... However, one thing I used to think was that



these are all Japanese words, and to write them, a long training in writing Japanese would be required, and only then could I learn calligraphy. At that point, I thought to myself that our Bengali language is also very beautiful, with so many words, and its script is also very beautiful, and so I thought, why can't I bring this method into Bengali as well? Or why can't I write some Bengali in this calligraphy?

But the real matter is that there is a fundamental difference between our writing system and Japan's: they used to write with a brush and they still write with a brush. That's why their scripts are different. And this Japanese script was inspired by Chinese, and those came from pictures. So, by doing this

calligraphy, many people return to the original images. But our Bengali alphabet or words were never inspired by such pictures. However, I still think that we can write Bengali words in many different ways, following the Japanese techniques and accessories. In this way, you could say I have introduced a calligraphy style of Bengali cursive writing. The Bengali calligraphy I had seen before, it was meant to be read and it was meant to be written beautifully. The Bengali I write, if you come back to it, is not very easy to read, but those who have seen my calligraphy for a long time can read it. They can understand what I have written. And it looks good that my own mother tongue, which is so beautiful, can be decorated with a huge letter in a font. It was from this idea that I started doing calligraphy, and it wasn't very difficult for me. But later, I felt that I wasn't able to bring a pan-Indian presence into this. I am definitely a Bengali, but for some reason, when I write Bengali words, it is somehow overshadowed by a narrowness. It's not that I have to show a lot of generosity in my art, but I felt that I wanted to do something that could touch many people. In doing that, I thought that if I could find a script from an Indian language in which I could do calligraphy and which also had an Indian essence, I first thought of the Indus script. But it is quite pictographic and has not been properly deciphered. Then I thought that the mother script of all these Indian scripts is Brahmi, and this Brahmi script is so beautiful; it looks good even on the Ashoka edicts. Then I thought that if I could write Sanskrit words and even Bengali words using that script, it might have a pan-Indian presence. And now I am working on that, and I want to work on it—that is, the idea of India. What do we understand when we say Bharat or Sanatan Bharat? Our respect, our humility, our cooperation, our non-violence—these ideas that define India. I have an intention to work on about a hundred of these words, selecting them and writing them in the Brahmi script, and I also want to work on some Sanskrit words in this script.



Subhadeep Ganguly is currently studying Comparative Literature at the Jadavpur University, India. He is an avid reader who likes to be immersed in all forms of art and believes art to be salvation in an improbable stochastic world. He is interested in pedagogical learning and wants to research on memory studies and their implications with comparative literature and other arts later on in his academic career.



Apurbaa Basu is a student of Jadavpur University, India, who studies at the International Relations Department and is currently pursuing her graduation course. Her interests include learning about various cultural experiences, and her specialisation includes Indian Classical Music.

Notes on Contributors



Adeel Sattar is the Press, Education & Cultural Secretary, High Commission of Pakistan in Colombo. He holds a MPhil in New Media from the University of Leicester with expertise in Media, Public Relations, Digital PR, Advocacy, Outreach & Communications. Additionally, he holds a Master's in Business Administration, Business, Management, Marketing, and Related Support Services, COMSATS Institute of Information and Technology, and Bachelor of Computer Sciences from the Bahria University. He has over 14 years of experience, including serving as the Head of Digital Media (Press Information Department) and the Media Manager at Ministries of Interior, Railways & Industries, Government of Pakistan.



Najma Amath is the Social Secretary, Diplomatic Division, High Commission of Pakistan in Colombo. She holds a Master's in Human Rights and Democratisation from the University of Colombo, Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Anthropology from the University of Sri Jayewardenepura and a Diploma in Forensic Medicine & Toxicology from the University of Sri Jayewardenepura. Additionally, she is reading for an LLB (Hons) Bachelor of Laws at the Open University of Sri Lanka.



Hassan Amir is a doctoral student in the Faculty of Graduate Studies at the University of Colombo. He holds a Master of Strategic and Defence Studies from the University Malaya (2009), a Master of Arts in Security Studies: Combating Terrorism Policy and Strategy from the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California (2011), and a Master of Science in Security and Strategic Studies from the Madras University (2019). He has a Bachelor of Arts Degree from the Jawaharlal Nehru University (2003).



Ramakrishnan Panchapakesan is an Assistant Professor at the Somaiya School of Design, Somaiya Vidyavihar University, with a multidisciplinary academic and research practice that bridges design, art history, and cultural studies. Alongside design, he teaches Indian Art History, Indian Mythology, and Indian narrative traditions, integrating historical and cultural perspectives into contemporary design education. Deeply passionate about research, his doctoral work focuses on the narrative friezes of Chola temples around Thanjavur, examining their visual storytelling traditions. His broader research interests extend to South Indian temple murals from the Vijayanagar, Nayaka, Maratha, and post-Maratha periods, exploring their artistic, narrative, and cultural significance.



Pallavi Nalawde-Jambhale has been associated with Somaiya Vidyavihar University for nearly two decades and currently serves as Director (I/C) of the K. J. Somaiya Institute of Dharma Studies and Head of the Departments of Centre for Buddhist Studies and Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology. Her academic work focuses on rock-cut architecture, Buddhist art and architecture, and ancient Indian culture. She has actively presented research papers at numerous national and international conferences and participated in academic workshops and seminars. She earned her Master's degree and Ph.D. in Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology from University of Mumbai.



Anuja Dutta is an Independent Research Scholar from Calcutta, West Bengal, India, specialising in the ecological and economic nexus of Bengal spectrality, including mechanisms of haunting and related ghostly phenomena in colonial and postcolonial vernacular literature. She was earlier affiliated to Presidency University, Calcutta as a Sociology Major during graduation and post-graduation years from 2012-2017. Later, she was an M.Phil. Research Scholar in Sociology at Jadavpur University, Calcutta (2018-2020) specialising in the literary traditions of supernatural fiction in Bengali as a marginalised literary genre.



Nahreen Saleha Shahadat serves as a Lecturer in the Department of Science and Humanities at the Military Institute of Science and Technology. She was previously a Graduate Teaching Assistant under the Department of English, Bangladesh University of Professionals, where she completed her M.A. in English Literature and Cultural Studies and B.A. (Hons.) in English, graduating *summa cum laude* both times. Her research interests include, but are not limited to, women and gender studies, cultural studies, postcolonial literature, South Asian literature, comparative literature, and psychoanalytic analyses.



Anup Shekhar Chakraborty is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Shillong, Meghalaya, and a member of the Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group (MCRG), Kolkata. With over 20 years of teaching and research experience, his work primarily focuses on the Himalayan region and India's Northeast.



Praggnaparamita Biswas is an Independent Scholar. After graduating from Banaras Hindu University (2014), she was awarded the Asiatic Society Fellowship (2017 – 2021) for doing a major project in Indology funded by the Ministry of Culture, Govt. of India. Later, she has been awarded with two short-term research grants from BAOU, Ahmedabad, and National Maritime Heritage Complex, Lothal, Gujarat, India for conducting research on “IPTA and Women Performers in Bengal” (2021) and “Maritime culture and Bengali Folklore” (2025) respectively. Her research works chiefly focus upon the Indian Feminist Theatre and Performance History, Indological Studies, Indian Film Studies, Partition Studies, and Maritime history, culture and heritage.



Pooja Kalita is trained as a sociologist and is a Research Fellow with the project – *Heritage as Placemaking: The Politics of Solidarity and Erasure in South Asia* funded by Riksbanken Jubileumsfond (Sweden). She is also a Visiting Fellow at Colombo Institute for Human Sciences (Sri Lanka). She was a Post-Doctoral Fellow with Central European University Democracy Institute’s (CEU DI) *Global Forum for Democracy and Development* and was affiliated to its South Asia Hub at Social Scientists’ Association (SSA) in Sri Lanka. Her core research interests include Gender studies, Sociology of food, Heritage Studies and Visuals in Social Sciences.



Aruna Jayasena is a PhD scholar attached to the Sociology Department of South Asian University - New Delhi. He is currently writing his final dissertation after completing his M.Phil. degree in 2022. He received his M.A. in Political Science (MAPS) on Democracy, Conflict and Governance Studies (DECAGS) 2015 from the University of Colombo. He obtained his B.A. (Hons) in Political Science from Hindu College, University of Delhi 2003. Jayasena has worked in the development and advertising sectors while engaging in the Sri Lankan Theatre as a Theatre Stage Manager for many years. Jayasena is also a freelance graphic designer and documentary filmmaker. His research interests include Neoliberalism, Public culture, Labour and Urban history and Sociology of food.



Manisha Singh Rajput is a doctoral research scholar in the Department of History, including AIHC and Archaeology, at H.N.B. Garhwal University, Srinagar Garhwal, Uttarakhand. Her ongoing doctoral thesis traces the continuity and change within the folk traditions of the Garhwal Region, specifically examining the impacts of modernisation, globalisation, and migration.



Surendra Singh Bisht is an Associate Professor in the Department of History, including AIHC and Archaeology, at H. N. B. Garhwal University, Srinagar Garhwal, Uttarakhand.



Tarun Kumar Bhatt is a doctoral research scholar in the Department of History, including AIHC and Archaeology, at H. N. B. Garhwal University, Srinagar Garhwal, Uttarakhand.



Sourav Sen is currently pursuing his Ph.D. at the Department of Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology, Visva Bharati (A Central University), Santiniketan, West Bengal, India. He is working on temple employees in the Kaveri delta region during the ninth to thirteenth century C.E. His area of interests is socio-cultural and epigraphic study of early medieval and medieval South Indian history particularly in Tamil Nadu. He has published a number of articles in several journals and book chapters and co-author of the book entitled *Bangla Bhashay Tamil Sekha* (in Bengali).



Mrinalini Atrey is an Assistant Professor of History, The Law School, University of Jammu; Secretary-General, ICICH-ICOMOS International; National Scientific Co-Counselor, ICOMOS-India. With over two decades of research experience, she explores ritual, memory, and resilience in the Jammu region, focusing on gendered foodways, oral traditions, and intangible cultural heritage. Her work spans documentation, pedagogy, and cultural programming, aligning local traditions with UNESCO's Living Heritage approach and SDG 11. Her contributions to heritage policy and research extend across diverse platforms, from river-based sacredscapes to syncretic culinary histories. She is deeply committed to participatory conservation and integrating community voices into heritage discourse, with leadership roles across national and international heritage committees.



SAARC Cultural Centre
No. 224, Bauddhaloka Mawatha, Colombo 7
Tel: +94 11 2584451 Fax: +94 11 2584452
Email: scc@saarcculture.org Web: www.saarcculture.org

