

Folk Culture of West Bengal - A Driving Force to Promote Cultural Tourism

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ABSTRACT

Tourism aims to recognize the importance of the continuity of culture & the balances within culture. Thus, tourism generates local employment both directly in the tourism sector & in various allied/support management sectors.

West Bengal is one of the important states in the country with its rich folk culture, creating authenticity & distinctiveness in the regional & global tourist market.

Tourism which connects people/visitors to local culture would help, not only in promoting the local destinations, but also to showcase it as a tourism product within the region, state, country & globally.

West Bengal with its rich cultural heritage & rich cultural tourism products has emerged as the perfect blend of modernity & traditions.

Folk Performing artists play a major role in preserving their valuable cultural resources with the initiative & support of folk cultural hubs, for their recognition.

Thus, this paper tries to explore & highlight those major areas or regions from which folk art & culture has emerged, to the tourist/visitors & also the performing artists involvement for the continued recognition of culture as economic drivers, influenced by local community, stakeholders & tourism marketing organizations.

Key words – Tourism, Culture, marketing, Folk Art

INTRODUCTION

India has been known for its culture, heritage & tradition since ancient times. Because of its diversity in culture, India has become a popular destination. India is a country of immeasurable diversities, unique cultural exploration & a plethora of opportunities. Indian art, culture & heritage have always been a captivating destination for tourists from all over the world. The diversity itself is the pride of the nation.

Cultural Tourism became popular only after World War II when people developed interest in discovering culture & life-style. Cultural Tourism had changed the scenario once the Government of India started promoting the Incredible India campaign in 2002.

Along with other attractions, each region consists of its own form of folk dance & music. Folk culture is very active in rural India as well as in some cities. Folk dance & music has lost its popularity because of the arrival of pop music & dance from the Western countries, but there are many people who love this folk culture, especially among the foreigners visiting India. The presence of traditional folk music in India is very large & it gives a representation of Indian village.

Kolkata, the capital city of West Bengal & the former capital of India, is the birthplace of modern Indian literary & artistic thoughts & richly, thickly, profoundly is referred as the cultural capital of India.

West Bengal located in the eastern part of India & boasts of the birth place of noble laureates Rabindra Nath Tagore, Mother Teresa, Amartya Sen, is rich with its cultural tourism products. Over the years, the culture has emerged profoundly. Politically, in India, East Bengal, i.e. the present-day Bangladesh & West Bengal which share cultural similarities, were known as Bengal.

Architecture of Bengal includes various types of motifs as well as it represents the unique area of region – Teracotta, Islamic, Indo-Sareanote, British architecture etc. that includes – temple, mosques, churches, palaces, forts etc.

Folk Tourism is a major social phenomenon of today's society. It is not only an amalgamation of sightseeing & entertainment, but also accelerates the pace of the economic development of the country by generating employment opportunities, earning foreign exchange, marketing of the destination, strengthening communities, protection & conservation of the environment & active contribution to the society.

Every region is identified with its handicrafts, fairs, folk dance, music & its people.

In terms of Tourism, West Bengal has all the three ingredients – sea (The Bay of Bengal), mountains (The Eastern Himalayas) & forest (The Sunderbans). Geographically, the state is long & narrow, running from the delta of the Ganges in the South to the mighty Himalayas with Darjeeling as the 'Queen of hill stations' nestled in the north.

West Bengal is regarded as the cultural cauldron of India. The great 'Bengal Renaissance' of the 19th & 20th century started with Raja Ram Mohan Roy(1775-1833) & ended with Noble Laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941).

As far as tourism in West Bengal is concerned, it is still a backbencher as compared to other states of India. Hill stations of Darjeeling & Kalimpong, lush green tree gardens of Dooars in North Bengal, Coastal town of Digha, the nature's retreat – Shantiniketan, Historical places like Murshidabad, Plassey, Nabadweep, City of Joy – Kolkata, – all these leads an elegance to West Bengal. Tourism in Bengal has been enriched with everything - be it the Gangasagar Mela, the Poush Mela of Shantiniketan or the 300 years old Sati Ma's mela at Kalyani, West Bengal is never short of fairs & festivals. The fairs & festivals, dance, music & drama etc. of Bengal are unique one-of-a kind to be found nowhere else on earth.

FOLK CULTURE

Folk Culture usually refers to a culture practiced by a small, homogeneous, rural group living relatively in isolation from other groups. It demonstrates the 'old ways' over novelty & relates to a sense of community which imbues with a sense of place. If elements of a folk culture are copied by or moved to a foreign locale, they will carry strong connections of their original place of creation (Wikipedia, May'2012). Dances & music of West Bengal are known across the globe for their beauty & fervour.

Folk culture develops as a result of particular physical, social & economic characteristics, experienced by a group (M. Hussain, 2012). As folk culture displays major variations from - Folk place to place, the device of culture region is a useful starting point for the study of traditional life styles in many parts of the World (J, Sen 2005).

The term 'folk' means 'lok' or people. Thus, folk culture of Bengal is developed, maintained & nurtured mainly by the uneducated common people of rural Bengal. Folk Culture is rooted in the religion, festival, education, health, emotion, love, marriage, entertainment, loneliness, various range of human sentiments. With the passage of time, urbanization, globalization & westernization have forced Bengal folk culture to face the challenge at present day.

Folk Culture has been employed as an aspect of tourism product. It may be defined as the collective heritage of Institutions, customs, skills, dress & way of life of a closely knit rural community.

Folk culture remains confined to a narrow territory. It originates from anonymous source, where the date of origin, as well as the originator, is unknown. Folk culture represents a large rural society. Folk Music, Folk Dance, Folk Drama, Folk Art, Folk Food, Folk Clothing, Folk Medicine – together comprises Folk Culture.

BENGALI FOLK CULTURE

Folk music always has a new appeal, which is always very approaching. Themes of Bengali classical music have its roots mainly in Jadev's Gitagovindam, Rabindrasangeet, Shyamasangeet, Mangalgiti & Padavali Kirtan.

Popular Folk Music includes:-

Baul - The Baul tradition is a unique heritage of Bengali folk music that has been influenced by regional folk music of Bengal that includes – Gombhira, Bhawaiya, Kirtans, Gajan festival music. Folk music is often accompanied by a one-stringed instrument – the ektara. This form of music was developed by a group of mystic minstrels from Bengal who were considered to be a syncretism group with music in their blood. In 2005, they were declared as the “Masterpiece of the Oral & intangible Heritage of Humanity” by UNESCO. This music is considered to be the medium of interaction with an Almighty as similar to Sufi.

Bhawaiya – It is a musical form which is popular in Coochbihar, Jalpaiguri & North Dinajpur in West Bengal. This type of song is sung by the Coacharan, & sung while driving their cow drawn cart. The singers are known as ‘bandia’. The songs depict sorrow, pain, love, separation & even natural calamities.

Bhadu & Tusu - Bhadu songs mean songs of the month of Bhadra, which are sung during the rainy season. They are sung by unmarried girls. Tusu is a folk ritual in the district of Purulia, observed by the woman folk during the Bengali month of Paus after harvesting is over. Tusu – is an unorthodox harvest goddess. This is the most important regional festival of the Bankura, Bardhaman, Murshidabad, Birbhum & Purulia district.

Jhumur – It is generally sung by the tribal people. Its geographical extension can be drawn from greater Chhotanagpur to Deccan plateau in the south. Specially, Purulia exercise this musical form extensively. The song has universal character - Radha & Krishna. The episodes of Ramayana & Mahabharata are also introduced in their songs. Thus, Jhumur is also known as Ramlila jhumur & Bharatlila jhumur.

Manasamangal- a folk song that is practiced in districts of Bankura, Purulia, North & South 24 Parganas

Bolan – popular in Burdwan, Nadia, Murshidabad & Birbhum district

Leto – folk song is generally sung by the people of Burdwan, Birbhum & Hooghly

Delightful sounds can be heard from folk music, because of unique arrangement of handmade musical instrument. Folk songs which have enchanting & captivating tunes, are sung in a semi-classical way and are usually dance-oriented. The folk songs & dances are performed for special occasions like – wedding, birth etc. & are typically sung in small village function. Some of them are associated with planting & harvesting local festivals.

The musical instruments used are different from those that are used for classical music. The performers generally craft their own musical instruments, using common available musical materials used for making – Dholak, Ektara, Dhak, Saringa, etc. They are known by their local names. The sparkle & wealth of folk music is spread all across the country, thus attracting tourists from all over the world & creating a global recognition. And India, booming with its cultural diversity & genuine hospitality invites a great number of tourists to India.

Popular folk dances include:-

Jhapan dance – performed to seek the blessing of God so that wishes for children are fulfilled. It is also prepared after recovery from smallpox & chicken pox.

Gambhira dance – devotional folk dance performed during chalak festival in March-April & popular in North Bengal. It is a solo performance & participants wear a mask while performing.

Tusu Dance – tribal folk dance of Bhirbhum district. It is performed in the month of December/January, where girls worship the idol of Goddess Tusu to get a good groom.

Santhal Dance – a tribal folk dance that showcases immense vibrancy & cheerfulness. Both men & women of Santhali tribe perform to celebrate spring festival.

Lathi dance - performed to express different situations of human life like – remorse, celebration, anger, pain or love, usually in the first 10 days of Muslim festival of Muharram.

Drama includes:-

Putulnaach – is a traditional art form of West-Bengal. A putul is made of bamboo, wood etc. Drawn by various strings/sticks from different parts of the body. The puppetry band has one main singer followed by the instrument players like – clarinet, flute, dhol & kansi. The putul are different types like – dang (rod) putul & tar(string) putul. The dancing & acting elements of the performance hinge on the traditions of the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas, with the epic themes being made totally assimilated in the climate of Bengal. Putul Naach is in more drama than dance – infact, a small & cheap edition of Jatra(folk play),(Ghosh & Banerjee, 2006).

Ban Bibir Pala – It is practiced in North & South 24 Parganas. Harmonium, Tabla, flute & kartal is being used, based on theme – Goddess Bonbibi of Sunderban.

Khan – people of Dinajpur areas perform the drama, using instruments - Harmonium, Khol, Flute, Table & Kartal, depicting village life, incidents of crime & injustice.

Natua – Mythological idea through physical exercise & playing with the fire is enacted by the people of Purulia. They use Dhak, Dhamsar & Kashi as instruments for the drama.

Alkaap – The performance hinge on focussing social life, using Harmonium, Tabla, Khanjari by the men & women of Murshidabad, Maldah & Birbhum.

Arts & Crafts include:-

Kantha Embroidery – is a form of embroidery that originated in West Bengal. It is the art of outlining decorative images with running stitch on clothes, with colourful threads & is used on saris, kurtas, bed-linen, quilts & so on.

Terracotta craft – is known for its pastoral & rustic charm. They were a craze in Bengal during the reign of Malla rulers, in the 16th & 17th century. The temples of Vishnupur stands as marvellous examples of the terracotta craft.

Scroll Paluting (Pat Chitra) – is done on thick fabrics, with the help of natural colour.

Conch Shell crafts – one of the most unique & beautiful form of handicrafts practiced in WB. It represents the art of engraving decorative motifs on the natural shells obtained from the ocean. They are considered to be extremely auspicious in the Hindu mythology.

Dokra Metal craft – the art of creating statues, jewellerys, idols with the help of clay, wax & molten metal.

Pottery - Different kinds of pots, like Mangal Ghat, Lakshmi Ghat, Manasha Ghat & Tulsimanch are designed.

Bankura Horses – made from terracotta & considered to be auspicious in West Bengal. Used in traditional Bengali rituals, as they are considered to represent the holy hover in Sun God's chariot.

Clay Doll - Putul (Bengali dolls) are a craze in the European market. Made of clay & in vibrant colours, they represent the rural Bengal. The clay dolls of Krishnanagar depict various social scenes, like Collector's count, tea gardens, Pandit Sabha & Charak festival are very popular.

Sholapith Craft – is a milky white sponge wood, used for crafting beautiful decorative pieces. Also known as 'herbal ivory', it is used to craft head wears & also backdrop of durga puja stages.

Paintings include:-

Poto Shilpo – Basic themes of these paintings are drawn from Puranas, Ramayana, Mahabharata & other contemporary issues. Eco-friendly colours, collected from leaves, fruits, flowers, plants & other natural elements are used for painting. The painters are usually from Purba & Paschim Midnapore & Bankura.

Alpana – is a folk art of floor drawings which is almost essential during pujas, weddings & other social occasions in Bengali families & is drawn in their homes, courtyards & farm houses and is followed all over Bengal. The history of Alpana art was influenced by the Shantiniketan & the Kalavabhan department of Viswabharati University of Bengal. Shantiniketan style of alpana is a famous form of art. Traditionally, it is done with rice paste, diluted to the consistency of thick milk & one's finger.

Folk Theatre includes :-

Jatra - West Bengal has a long standing tradition of folk drama, known as Jatra. It is a musical drama which depicts some story in a melodious manner, like the story of Lord Krishna, where the dialogues are all dramatic monologues.

Natok (Drama) – a kind of theatre drama where the performers act on a small story, which may conclude in one act or may be followed by two /three acts.

Dance Drama – It is related with some spiritual saga of Folk deities like – Shitala, Manasha & Chondi. Manasha mangol, Shitala mongal – these dance dramas are performed in front of the deities as an offering ritual. Manasa Mongal reveals the story of Devi Manosha – the serpent Goddess & Behula – a pious wife who had lost her husband – Lakhinder due to snake bite on her marriage night.

Folk deities of West Bengal include:-

Shitola Maa – is worshipped on the dry season of winter & spring in rural villages of Bengal. Small pox is identified with this goddess.

Manasa Maa – Manasa devi, is a hindu folk goddess of snakes, worshipped mainly in West Bengal, chiefly for the preservation & cure of snakebite & also for fertility & prosperity.

Banabibi – famous goddess of south 24 Parganas mainly in Sunderban who protect people through her supernatural power from all sorts of unusual incidents & happenings.

Sasthi – It is believed that this deity is the protector of newborn babies. Especially, Bengali mothers are very much part of this deity (Roy, 2010)

Maa Olaichandi – is the goddess of cholera, worshipped by people of West Bengal. She is venerated by Hindus & Muslims of Bengal. She is also known for plaque, eye problem & cattle disease (McDaniel, 2012).

Role of Folk Tourism in the Socio-Economic Development of the state

Culture plays an important role in the socio-economic development of the region, which is a combination of attitudes, values, goals & practices. Culture develops into creativity which manifests themselves in almost all economies, social & other activities.

Mr. Amitava Bhattacharya, founder of Banglanatak.com, a social organization, has been instrumental in bringing a positive change in villages of West-Bengal that were seats of traditional forms of art for the past 17 years.

He works with more than 10 villages of the state & has created an impact in the lives of the local artist communities, resulting in their socio-economic development. Thus, folk art has become a tourist attraction, which in turn, has given rise to rural folk-art based tourism enterprises.

The hubs provide a new, positive identity to the localities that were previously identified as deprived rural villages. The rural creative hubs are gradually emerging as new cultural tourism destinations to bring additional income opportunities to the so-far economically marginalized areas.

They also promote tourism by facilitating interaction between the local community & the visitors. The local people share their heritage & the tourists take back a piece of human history. The festivals organized annually at these villagers highlight how Intangible Cultural Heritage can be a way of life of the local people.

STUDY AREA

West Bengal feature three distinct types of physical features:-

Jungle Mahal Area – extends from western border districts to the Ganga river in the east.

Tarai Region – extends from foothills of Himalaya to North Bengal plain.

Delta Region – extends from Bhagirathi Hooghly river until it reaches Bay of Bengal.

The region is bifurcated by rivers like – Damodar, Ajay, Rupnarayana, Subarnarekha, Hooghly & their numerous tributaries. During various historical eras, diverse racial groups invaded & lived in different parts of West Bengal due to vast reserve of natural resources which serves the basis of agriculture & food gathering economy. The population of West Bengal are not descendent from one parent race, but it is the result of a mixture of diverse racial groups coming to this country during different periods of pre-historic & later ages.

Western border comprises of – Purulia, Bankura, Bardhaman, Birbhum, adjoining to Chhotanagpur division & Rajmahal hills of Jharkhand is predominantly proto-australoid. North Bengal – comprises the districts of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri & Cooch Bihar that represents different groups of the mongoloid group. Population along the valley of Ganga – represents higher social groups, generally belongs to the armenoid group. However, the population along the Gangetic valley up to the south is an important part of the country with regard to trade, commerce & agriculture - a mixture in its social composition.

METHODOLOGY

The paper has attempted a qualitative analysis of the subject matter. Detailed information has been done through journals, books, magazines & also Television channels like – CTVN, Akash Aath to find out the origin, instruments used, types, themes, evolution of folk types & how it influences the tourism of West-Bengal.

FINDINGS & SUGGESTIONS

Chokhidhani of Jaipur, Rajasthan, the princely state has shown how by proper marketing & planned infrastructure developments, fairs & festivals can win the admiration of the world's tourism fraternity. The world famous - Pushkar Fair as well as the Jaisalmer Desert Festival are today ranked amongst the world's most colourful fairs. Similarly, *Vishalla of Gujrat*, where architects & interiors designers have designed a space, leading keen attention to every detail & a home to a valley of local arts, crafts, music, dance, flora & fauna, cuisine - has emerged as a unique hospitality brand – a commitment to provide guest with unique experience of the state. Thus looking into the above states, and given the plethora of fairs in

West Bengal, the government needs to identify a few such fairs (wherein the element of ethnicity & heritage is most preferred) & then go in for accelerated infrastructure developments.

There is a dearth of quality tourist accommodation in many places of West-Bengal, like – Bhirbhum, Bankura, Nadia where fairs are held. Most places don't have the basics like comfortable rooms, clean linens & toilets. Even to reach these places, proper network & transportation is not available. The need of the hour is to improve the infrastructure facilities, in the form of tented accommodation, sanitary provisions, good hygienic food. Proper signage's have to be put in place for the benefit of tourists – domestic as well as international. Once the logistics are set right/approximately, then these colourful Bengali fairs will begin to cast their mesmerizing spell on the discerning international tourists, As a result, the destinations will grow up eventfully to attract tourists' globally & thus cultural tourism will flourish in West-Bengal.

The greatness, immensity & the sheer diversity of West-Bengal come to light in these festivals. The USP of West-Bengal's fairs lie on the fact that most of them are sheer aesthetic feasts in which nature, religion & people have blended harmoniously. Most of them are traditional age-old festivals that have been celebrated by generations of Bengalis & yet they continue to appeal the outside world.

A realization has to be done by the Government that Fairs & Festivals serve as great attributes & tourism products /tools for any tourist destination & helps in depicting the state's cultural landscape in a rather profound manner. Fairs & Festivals also leave an indelible mark on the people's mind since everything is presented live in front of an audience, the impressions of which they carry with them to their respective countries & disseminate among their friends & relatives.

The data on the relationship between culture, tourism & regional development are somewhat limited. Although culture is a major motivation for tourism, relatively few countries or regions collect specific data on the volume of tourism consumption related to culture.

Though in 21st century, science, technology, globalization are the key players among the survival strategies of human life, but to keep the folk culture alive, State Government, NGOs', Tourism Associates needs to take more social responsibilities towards marketing the culture, by making it more accessible in every drawing room through TV, newspapers, magazines & also displaying on monitors in places like airports, railway stations, bus-stands, shopping arcades. Social cultural organizations also need to frequently interact with the folk culture & keep them motivating. Ministry of Culture, Central Govt. as well as State Govt. must take every possible step like opening the scope of further research, folk drama festival, folk literature fair, folk dance & musical reality show, reward & acknowledgement of veteran folk artists, in order to keep alive the tradition of our society.

CONCLUSION

After a detailed study on folk culture of West Bengal, it can be assumed that this traditional culture can be preserved by extending the support to the rural Bengali people, who are agrarian in economy, backward socially & rustic culturally but beautiful by heart. They have been performing these forms of arts, parallel with marginal works in agricultural field & other activities. They may not be thoroughly professional artists, but do not keep the stones unturned to hold on their folk culture legacy active. However, it has also been observed that reason behind is, that rural Bengal is influenced by material science & technology culture along with western cultural influences. On the other hand, various govt. & non-govt. organizations, print and electronic media has been making careful efforts to sustain folk culture, as it also plays a major role in showcasing the Cultural Tourism which forms the epitome of West Bengal. Economic globalization, which made life more comfortable, has taken out the nativity smell from the so called rural Bengal.

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