

Exilic Cultures on Display: Tourism, Theatre, and Appropriation in Tripura

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Abstract

The development of tourism in Tripura is a region with a rich cultural heritage, but also shaped by displacement. It involves complex dynamics in the preservation and appropriation of culture. This study focuses on the influence of tourism on Bengali refugee communities who settled in Tripura after the Partition and subsequent migration from Bangladesh. It looks at how the influence of tourism changes cultural expressions such as Manasa Mangal narratives, Maimansingha Gitika, Patachitra, and Gajan rituals. Spiritual saga Manasa Mangal's Behula-Lakhindar, and rural life celebration Maimansingha Gitika, now serve foreign tourists. From performative mode into more ornamented souvenirs, Patachitra, Gajan rituals, and something related to farm-based cultural quests are turned into exotic spectacles, alienating the very community this project speaks about. This research depicts the degradation of rich traditions but also demonstrates resistance as communities adapt to reclaim agency and preserve identity. It supports responsible tourism that aligns cultural preservation with community empowerment.

Keywords: cultural heritage, displacement, appropriation, traditional performances, community empowerment

Introduction

Tripura, a northeastern state of India, stands at the confluence of cultural richness and historical upheavals. The region, with its layered history of displacements, has been a repository of diverse traditions that encompass storytelling, ritualistic performances, and visual arts. The forced migrations of Bengali refugees from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), particularly during and after the partition of 1947, and subsequent waves in the 1970s, have significantly shaped the cultural landscape of Tripura. However, the rise of tourism in recent decades has added a new dimension to this interplay of culture and displacement. Tourism's demand for spectacle and aestheticised narratives often recontextualises and commodifies traditional performances, challenging their authenticity and rootedness.

As Niharranjan Ray observes in Bengal under Akbar and Jahangir, "*The cultural milieu of Bengal has always been one of adaptation and synthesis, shaped by historical migrations and*

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social upheavals.”¹ This perspective underscores the evolving nature of Tripura’s cultural fabric, shaped by its unique history.

This paper examines how tourism has impacted the cultural expressions of displaced Bengali communities in Tripura, particularly focusing on performances and art forms such as *Manasa Mangal narratives*, *Maimansingha Gitika*, *Patachitra*, and *Gajan rituals*. By analysing these cultural practices, the paper highlights the tensions between preservation and appropriation, the challenges of displacement, and the resilience of marginalised communities in reclaiming their agency.

Historical Context of Displacement in Tripura

The influx of Bengali refugees into Tripura occurred in distinct waves, beginning with the partition of 1947, which divided India and Pakistan, leading to massive displacements across borders. Tripura, sharing a porous border with East Pakistan, became a significant refuge for displaced Bengali Hindus. The 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War further intensified this migration, bringing an influx of refugees who sought safety amidst political and communal strife. This demographic shift profoundly impacted Tripura’s sociocultural fabric, blending Bengali and Indigenous traditions.

Prafulla Kumar Chakrabarti in *The Marginal Men* aptly notes, “*Displacement is not merely a physical relocation but a reconstitution of identity and culture, as individuals and communities strive to recreate a sense of belonging in foreign terrains.*”² This insight highlights the deeper cultural ramifications of displacement, reflected in Tripura’s evolving identity.

During the kingly period, Tripura’s rulers, such as Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya, encouraged cultural amalgamation, supporting both Indigenous and Bengali practices. This fostered a shared cultural milieu between the communities, with rivers like the Gomati serving as vital geographical and cultural symbols. Bengali refugees brought with them a repertoire of narratives and performances rooted in their agrarian and spiritual traditions, which found resonance in the shared cultural ethos of Tripura.

Cultural Practices and Their Transformations

1. *Manasa Mangal Narratives*

Manasa Mangal, a celebrated narrative tradition, tells the story of the serpent goddess Manasa and her devotee Behula, who defies death to bring her husband Lakhindar back to life. Traditionally performed in temple courtyards and along riverbanks, this spiritual saga is a powerful symbol of resilience and faith, deeply connected to agrarian life and natural elements.

The narrative resonates with lines like,

“বেহুলা বোঝে না ব্যাকুল প্রাণ,

¹ Ray, Niharranjan. *Bengal under Akbar and Jahangir*. Mukherjee analysing & Co., 1966.

² Chakrabarti, Prafulla Kumar. *The Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal*. Naya Udyog, 1990emphasise.

এখানেই বন্ধুর রাখবো জীবন,

মনসার অগ্নি সাথে,

চলার পথে।”³

Behula understands not her restless heart; she pledges her life here, walking the path of fire with Manasa’s will. These lines emphasise Behula's resilience and unwavering devotion as she journeys through trials imposed by Manasa. It reflects the spiritual and emotional core of the narrative, making it an apt inclusion to highlight the traditional depth of the performance. The imagery underscores the connection between natural elements and human resilience.

Romila Thapar in *Cultural Pasts* observes, “*The stories of Manasa embody not just devotion but the resilience of agrarian communities whose lives are deeply intertwined with the rhythms of nature.*” This perspective enriches the understanding of Behula’s journey as a metaphor for human endurance against adversity.

With the rise of tourism, the performance of Manasa Mangal has shifted from communal spaces to curated stages at cultural festivals. While this adaptation introduces the narrative to broader audiences, it often strips the performance of its spiritual depth, reducing it to a spectacle for tourist consumption. Behula’s journey, a metaphor for resilience against adversity, risks being overshadowed by the aesthetic demands of external spectators.

2. Maimansingha Gitika

The Maimansingha Gitika, a collection of folk ballads from the Mymensingh region of Bangladesh, embodies the emotional and cultural ethos of rural Bengali life. These ballads, rich in themes of love, loss, and community, were brought to Tripura by Bengali refugees. Traditionally performed as oral recitations accompanied by simple musical instruments, the Gitika served as both entertainment and a means of preserving collective memory.

Sukumar Sen in *Bangla Sahityer Itihas* reflects, “*The folk ballads of Bengal are not just songs but living repositories of collective memory, preserving the joys and sorrows of rural life in their lyrical flow.*”⁴ This observation underscores the emotive power and historical significance of the Gitika.

Quoting from a ballad:

“নিশিথে দেখা হলো দুই চোখের মাজহারে,

ভালোবাসা উঠিল জাগিয়া অন্তরের অন্তস্থলে।”⁵

In the dead of night, our eyes met in silence. This evocative verse captures the tender and poignant essence of rural love stories, a hallmark of the Maimansingha Gitika. It beautifully illustrates the lyrical intimacy and emotional depth that define these folk ballads, making it a powerful addition to the discussion on the transformation of traditional cultural expressions.

³ Sen, Dineshchandra. *The Ballads of Bengal*. Calcutta University Press. 1923.

⁴ Sen, Sukumar. *Bangla Sahityer Itihas*. Ananda Publishers, 1977.

⁵ Sen, Dineshchandra. *Mymensintha Gitika*. Calcutta University Press. 1923

This highlights the lyrical intimacy of these narratives. In recent years, the Gitika has been recontextualised for cultural festivals aimed at tourists. Performers are compelled to adapt the ballads to suit modern tastes, often losing the raw emotional intensity and spontaneity that defined the original performances. This shift underscores the tension between cultural preservation and commodification.

3. Patachitra (Narrative Art)

Patachitra, a traditional narrative art form combining painted scrolls with musical storytelling, is another cultural expression brought to Tripura by Bengali refugees. The art form, deeply rooted in rural and religious life, narrates stories from epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, as well as local legends.

As Tapati Guha-Thakurta explains in *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, “*The art of Patachitra was traditionally a dynamic interplay of the visual and the oral, where the scrolls narrated epics as much as the storyteller's voice brought them to life.*”⁶ This duality highlights the original performative essence of Patachitra, now often diminished by commercialisation.

A typical performance would begin with the invocation:

“রামার লীলা কথা বলি, চিত্রের মাঝে ছবি তুলে,

অন্ধকারে আলো জ্বলাই, কথার মাঝে রং মিশাই।”⁷

Let me narrate Rama’s tales, painting pictures with my words. This verse encapsulates the essence of Patachitra performances, where storytelling merges seamlessly with visual art, creating a vibrant interplay of imagery and narrative. The poetic rhythm and metaphor emphasise the artist's role in illuminating complex tales through their scrolls, enriching discussions on its transformation due to tourism. Tourism has transformed Patachitra into a marketable commodity, with scrolls now produced primarily as decorative items. While this commercialisation provides economic opportunities for artists, it often divorces the art from its performative and narrative elements, reducing it to mere ornamentation. The spiritual and communal aspects of Patachitra, once central to its practice, are increasingly marginalized.

4. Gajan Rituals

Gajan rituals, associated with the worship of Lord Shiva, are agrarian festivals that blend religious devotion with theatrical performances. These rituals, characterised by vibrant processions and symbolic acts of penance, reflect the spiritual and agricultural rhythms of rural life. Anette Wagner in *Performative Landscapes* notes, “*Rituals like Gajan are not just acts of devotion but also seasonal markers, symbolising the symbiotic relationship between humanity and the environment.*”⁸ This interpretation aligns with the agrarian roots and communal ethos

⁶ Guha-Thakurta, Tapati. *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India*. Columbia University Press, 2004.

⁷ Bhattacharya, Ashutosh. *Patua Sangit: Chitrakala O Kabita* by. 1957

⁸ Wagner, Anette. *Performative Landscapes: A Study of Gajan Rituals in Rural Bengal*. Verlag Dr. Müller, 2010.

of Gajan rituals.

The chants during Gajan often echo the symbiosis of nature and divinity:

“ভোলে বাবার গাজন, মাটি থেকে ভুবন,

জীবন থেকে মোক্ষ খোঁজে, নৃত্যে গানে ভাসন।”⁹

Lord Shiva’s festival, rising from the soil to the heavens. This quote illustrates the deep spiritual and agrarian roots of Gajan rituals, where the connection between the earthly and the divine is celebrated through music, dance, and symbolic acts, perfectly encapsulating the rituals' essence. In the context of tourism, Gajan rituals have been repackaged as exotic spectacles, staged for the entertainment of visitors. This detachment from their agrarian and religious roots diminishes their cultural significance and alienates the communities for whom these rituals are a vital expression of identity and faith.

The Interplay of Theatre, Tourism, and Displacement

Tourism’s performative dimensions often reshape traditional practices to align with the expectations of external audiences. In Tripura, cultural festivals and heritage projects prioritise aestheticised representations of traditions, sidelining the voices and agency of the displaced communities. This process not only commodifies cultural expressions but also perpetuates narratives of marginalisation, as economic and political stakeholders exploit these practices for profit. Sumanta Banerjee in *The Parlour and the Streets* cautions, “*Cultural practices risk losing their essence when recontextualised for external consumption, as the original meanings often give way to commodification.*”¹⁰ This warning is crucial to understanding the compromises involved in adapting traditional performances for tourism.

However, the displaced Bengali communities have demonstrated resilience by adapting these practices to reclaim agency and preserve identity. Performers and artisans negotiate the demands of tourism while striving to retain the essence of their traditions. For instance, some artists incorporate modern elements into Patachitra while maintaining its narrative integrity, creating a dialogue between tradition and contemporary relevance.

The Way Forward: Responsible Tourism and Cultural Preservation

To address the challenges posed by tourism, there is a need for ethical strategies that prioritise community empowerment and cultural authenticity. This includes:

- *Community-Centric Tourism Models:* Involving displaced communities in the planning and execution of tourism projects ensures that their voices and interests are represented.
- *Revitalisation of Cultural Spaces:* Supporting the preservation of traditional performance spaces, such as temple courtyards and riverbanks, helps maintain the contextual integrity of cultural practices.

⁹ Sen, Dineshchandra. *Folk Rituals and Traditions of Bengal*. Calcutta University Press. 1920

¹⁰ Banerjee, Sumanta. *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta*. Oxford University Press, 1989.

- *Economic Incentives for Artists:* Providing fair compensation and resources for performers and artisans enables them to sustain their practices without compromising authenticity.
- *Education and Awareness:* Promoting awareness among tourists about the historical and cultural significance of these practices fosters respect and appreciation.

Conclusion

The interplay of tourism, theatre, and displacement in Tripura reveals the complexities of cultural preservation in the face of commodification. The transformation of practices such as Manasa Mangal narratives, Maimansingha Gitika, Patachitra, and Gajan rituals highlights the tensions between adaptation and authenticity. While tourism presents opportunities for cultural exchange and economic growth, it also necessitates a critical reevaluation of its impact on marginalised communities.

As UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage in South Asia asserts, "Cultural preservation in postcolonial contexts must go beyond mere documentation, striving instead to empower communities to retain and evolve their traditions." By foregrounding the experiences of displaced Bengali refugees and their cultural expressions, this paper underscores the importance of responsible tourism that honours the historical and cultural context of Tripura. In doing so, it advocates for a model of tourism that aligns cultural preservation with community empowerment, ensuring that the rich traditions of Tripura's exilic cultures continue to thrive.

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