

Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Nashya Sheikh Community of North Bengal: A Study on Some Agricultural Beliefs and Practices

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Abstract:

Cultural heritage is the legacy of physical artifacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations. Cultural heritage is of two types: Tangible and Intangible. 'Tangible Cultural Heritage' refers to physical artifacts produced, maintained and transmitted intergenerational in a society. 'Intangible Cultural Heritage' indicates 'the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their or a place's Cultural Heritage' Traditionally, the Nashya Sheikh Muslim community of North Bengal is believed in various Belief and Customs.. In this paper, an attempt will be made to we find out historical significance of some agricultural belief and practices of Nashya Sheikh community of North Bengal, prospect and problems facing this heritage and steps to be taken to preserve it.

Keywords: Nashya Sheikh, Rajbangsi Muslims, Gochorpana, Hariguri, Garuchumani, Baribandha.

The **Nashya Sheikh** or NashyaSekh is a Muslim community, inhabitants of the northern parts of West Bengal. They are culturally and linguistically similar to both Rangpuri people of northern Bangladesh and Goalpariya people of Assam. Though small in number, a section of people of Purnia in the neighbouring state of Bihar are belongs to that community and locally they are known as the Bengali Sheikh. With reference of some regional names, more commonly they are known as the **Rajbangsi Muslims**.² The Nashya are considered to be an important indigenous group found in northern West Bengal, particularly in North Bengal. They concentrated in the districts of Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur and Malda district of Chachol and Gajol.³ They are homogeneous with the Koch Rajbangsi people and also, they are bi-lingual – one is Bengali language and another is Rajbangsi language or Kamatapuri language. Outside home or in occupational sphere they used both Bengali and Rajbonshi language but in-home setting they prefer Rajbonshi language for communication.⁴ Rajbangsi's were originally the practitioners of animism, but later on they converted themselves to Hinduism. Although they converted to Hinduism but they were loose followers of Hinduism, but gradually a small section of this people (mainly Koch, Rajbonshi, Mech, Polia) converted to Islam.⁵ The local Hindus started

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calling them '*nostoseikh*' that means, impure Sheikh or spoiled Sheikh. This conversion of small section influenced many, which resulted major sections conversion into Islam from Hinduism and collaborated with mainstream Muslims. This association impacted their name '*nostoseikh*' which slowly got Islamicised and turn them into '*Nashyaseikh*'.⁶The Nashya's trace their origin into the indigenous communities of Koch Rajbangsi of northern part of West Bengal. Their conversion to Islam is said to have taken over from few centuries, and the Nashya still retain many cultural traits of their pre-Islamic past.⁷ Most of the traditional people of the community are non-practitioner of Muslim beliefs and practices but the newer generations are becoming more Islamic and the number is increasing day by day due to the impact of globalization.⁸

The Nashya Sheikhs as a community was once strictly endogamous but their marriage with mainstream Bengali Muslims brought them closer to the Bengali culture. Their physical appearance seems to be more similar to Bengalis rather than Rajbangsi people. They are divided into lineages such as Bepari, Pramanik, Sarkar, Rahaman, Ali, Miah, Islam and Sekh etc. Each of these lineage groups did intermarry among them. The community is mainly following Hanafi school of Sunni Islam.⁹ The community have set up their own political and cultural organization, the Uttar Banga Angrassar Muslim Sangram Samiti, which acts as pressure group for this community. The Government of West Bengal so far identified Nashya Sheikh Muslim as OBCs on the basis of their occupation and socio-economic condition.¹⁰ Currently the people of Nashik Sheikh Community in North Bengal, they are politically united through the Nashya Sheikh Development Forum (Uttarbanga Nashya Sheikh Unnayan Mancha).¹¹

Cultural heritage is the legacy of physical artifacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations. Cultural heritage is of two types: Tangible and Intangible. 'Tangible Cultural Heritage' refers to physical artifacts produced, maintained and transmitted intergenerationally in a society. 'Intangible Cultural Heritage' indicates 'the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their or a place's Cultural Heritage'.¹² Traditionally, the *Nashya Sheikh* Muslim community of North Bengal is believed in various belief and practices. They are following these beliefs and practices from generation to generation.¹³ In this paper, an attempt has been made to find out the prospects and problems facing this heritage and steps to be taken to preserve it, along with the historical significance of some agricultural beliefs and practices of Nashya Sheikh Community of North Bengal.

There are eight districts in North Bengal that is Malda, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur, Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar and Cooch Behar. Its geographical location is Gangas in south to Himalaya in north and Bihar in West to Assam in east. The residential Muslim population is one of the most important indigenous people of this region.¹⁴ They are

25 percent of the total population in North Bengal. In this context the Muslims are the most important minority religious group in this region. They have been living in this region, even before their conversion to Islam.¹⁵ In large area of North Bengal, a large portion of indigenous Hindu population converted in Muslim in 13th to 18th century. So naturally they are very close to with indigenous Hindu population.¹⁶ Without the difference of religious faith there are various similarities in occupations, culture and tradition between the Muslims and Hindu population of North Bengal.¹⁷

The Muslim society of Bengal, as with varying degrees of importance in other parts of India, was composed of both immigrants and indigenous converts. The question of local conversion presents a historical complexity that has given scope for some intellectual wrangling. The controversy centres round whether or not the bulk of the Muslim people in Bengal are autochthons, and if so, what social and economic strata they were mostly derived from. When the British administrators first came in contact with the people of Bengal, they arrived at the conclusion that the Muslims constituted an insignificant number in the population. Their estimates, formed on very insufficient grounds, were generally assumed to be approximately correct.¹⁸ Adam in his Education Report notes about the district of Rajshahi: Before visiting Rajshahi, we had been led to suppose that it was peculiarly Hindu district.¹⁹ Hamilton on official authority [the estimates of 1801] states the proportion to be that of two Hindus to one Musalman; and in a work published by the Calcutta School Book Society for the use of schools (1827), the proportion is said to be that of ten Hindus to six Musalmans. Adam's own investigations led him to reverse this to seven to three, or the proportion of 1,000 Musalmans to 450 Hindus. The first census of Bengal found it 1,000 Muslims to 288 Hindus.²⁰ In 1830 the first census of the city of Dacca was taken by H. Watters, who estimated the native population at 66,667, of whom 35,238 were Muslims and 31,429 Hindus.²¹ In 1839 Taylor observed that the population of the district of Dacca consisted of Hindus and Muslims in nearly equal proportions. Even as late as 1860, the Revenue Survey arrived at the conclusion that the population of the Dacca district consisted of 455,182 Hindus and 449,223 Muslims. These estimates indicate the. General conviction of earlier administrators until the first census of the whole of Bengal in 1872 revealed that, in Lower Bengal alone, there were 17,608,730 Muslims, of whom 7,948,152 or 45 per cent resided in the nine eastern districts, while the total number of Hindus in the same province was 18,100,438. Throughout the central and eastern districts, with the exception of 24-Parganas, the Muslims constituted at least one-half of the population. Within these districts is a central tract running from Rangpur and Mymensingh on the north to the Bay of Bengal, in every part of which the Muslims were in a decided majority. The discovery was too revealing to pass without an attempt to comprehend the phenomenon. The British administrators and observers strongly believed that this Muslim preponderance in the Bengal population resulted largely from the fact of local conversion.²² Early observers like Hodgson and Buchanan-Hamilton had already paved the way for Beverley, Wise, Risley and who argued strongly in favour of the theory of local conversion. But it is not so much the local conversion as such, as their opinionated

view about the conversion from the lower rungs of the Hindu social ladder that drew stiff opposition from some quarters and led to sharp diatribes from either side.²³

Khan BahadurDewanFazleRubbie of Murshidabad wrote a book - *Aqiqat-iMusalman-i Bangla*, which was translated into English as *The Origin of the Musulmans of Bengal* (1895) to focus attention on the Muslim immigrants in Bengal at different periods of history. FazleRubbie's stand was strongly upheld as late as our own decade by Rahim, who along with FazleRubbie smells at the back of this 'low class theory' a 'definite intention of lowering the prestige of the Muslims of Bengal. The rejoinder from the other side is no less sharp: The dislike which educated Muhammadans have for the theory that most of the local converts in eastern and northern Bengal are of Chandal and Koch origin seems to be due to the influence of Hindu ideas regarding social status, according to which these tribes occupy a much-degraded position. The root of the controversy lies in the fact that the history of the spread and dissemination of Islam in Bengal, as elsewhere in India, is largely shrouded in obscurity. Historical allusions are sporadic and inadequate for framing an incontrovertible picture. Understandably enough, inference and imagination have taken the place of factual analysis. Fact of local conversion seems fairly despite this, the well established; there are quite a few references in historical works to local conversion. The earliest is about the conversion of a Mech chief, 'Ali, at the hands of Muhammad bin BakhtyarKhaljl during his march through northBengal against Tibet. We are also told about the conversion of a Yogi of Kamrup named Bhojar Brahman; who arrived at Lakhnauti in the reign of 'Ali MardinKhalji (1210-3 A.D.) in search of a Muslim scholar for the purpose of holding a polemical discussion. He was thoroughly impressed by Qairukn-ud-DinSamarqandi and accepted Islam. From the same source we come to know about the conversion of another religious personality of Kamrup, Ambabha-natha. The conversion of Sultan Jalal ud-Din Muammad, son of Raja Ganesahas already been discussed in some detail. Kalapahi, alias Raju, the famous military commander in the Karrani regime is known the name, which sounds rather strange, can very well be an Arabic or Persian corruption of Vajra Brahman, a name quite appropriate for a Hindu Yogi or a Buddhist Tantrist: Rahim takes him to be a 'Vedantist Brahmin' for reasons not clear to his readers to be a Brahmana converts. KalidasaGajadani,Rajput immigrant in Bengal during the reign of Islam Shah - 2- Sur (1545-53 A.D.), who had been converted to Islam, left a long line of illustrious successors including his son, Isa Khan and grandson Musi Khan, Masnad-i 'Ala', two of the leading Birabhuitas of Bengal, who identified themselves strongly with the local interests and culture. During the governorship of Islam Khan (1608-13 A.D.) Raghu-roya, the Hindu chief of Shahzadpur in the Pabna district embraced Islam. A number of medieval family histories record Brahmana and Kayastha antecedents of some converted Muslim families. The Pirali, the Sarkhanl and the Srimanta-khaniBrahmanas were thrown out of the pale of orthodoxy for having family antecedents who had been converted to Islam. KamaluddinCaudhuri and JamaluddinChaudhuri, the *zamindars* of Singhatia, were known to be Brahmana converts to Islam. The Raj is of Kharagpur were originally Khetauris, and became Muslims. The *Dewan* family of

Pargana Sarail in Tripura was of known Hindu origin. The family of As'ad Musa Khan had a great Sanskrit scholar, Mathuresa, as his court-poet. 'Ali Khan of Baranthan in Chittagong is by origin a branch of the Srijukta family of Naupara. Their ancestor SyamaRayachaudhuri was converted to Islam. The ancestors of Asdullah, the zamindar of Birbhum in the time of MurshidQuli Khan, were known to be Hindus, The genealogical table of the Miyanfamily of Srirampur, in the subdivision of Patua-Khali, Bakla, shows their Brahmana ancestry. Ivananda-majumdar was converted to Islam and came to be known as Sibani Khan. The same is known about the Rajas of Rupsi in the thana of Jhalkathi and the Khan family of Sirjug in Bakla. The Muslim Chaudhuri family of Shahbazpur in Sylhet traces its origin to the Hindu Jangdar family of Panchakhanda. Svaruparama, son of Syama-royaJangdar of this Hindu family was converted to Islam and became known as Shahbaz Khan. The Muslim Caudhuri family of Daulatpur in Sylhet is also known to be a noted founder branch of the family of Anandapur, of Ananda-riya, the Medieval Bengali literature also alludes to the fact of local conversion. Seka-subhodaya, one of the earliest literary works of medieval Bengal, doubtfully ascribed to Halayutha, who was one of the court-poets of king Lakmaasena, shows the possibility of conversion at the Contemporary foreign travellers did not fail to observe the phenomenon of local conversion.²⁴

Traditionally, the *Nashya Sheikh* Muslim community of North Bengal are believed in various Belief and Customs. They are following these beliefs from generation to generations, like *Gosalpana* (when new seeds of Paddy are showing), *Nayabhat* (when new paddy taking at home), *Pusna* (cake made of rice meal), *goruchumani* (Swimming of Cow's), *ChaitraSankranti* (last day of Chaitra month), *BachharPahela* (first day of every new Bengali year), *SonaKapar* (during marriage gifts of Golds and saris), *HaludMakha* (using turmeric on face and body at the day of Marriage), *Git Gaoa* (Singing of Marriage songs), *ChailanBati* (giving blessings with lamp), *PasaKhela* (Playing Pasa), *SwadKhaoano* (giving foods of woman's choice during pregnancy), *NaboJatakerChul Katano* (cutting of hair of a new born baby), *MukheBhat* (ceremony of putting rice into a child's mouth for the first time), *Asouchapalan* (after the death of any family person), *Kriya Karma* (Final ceremony for the peace of the death soul after 40 days of death), *Dostipata* (making new friends), *BapdaiDeoa* (establish father as a relation), *Mannat Kara* (wish to God or Allah during bad times) etc.²⁵ Though these kinds of local culture are not approved by Islamic law, but those are deep rooted into the mind of the *Nashya Sheikh* people. Though these kinds of customs and beliefs are not now practice by *Nashya Sheikh* People, but those are prevalent in the society in limited numbers.²⁶

WHEN NEW SEEDS OF PADDY ARE SHOWING (GOCHORPANA):

Paddy plantation is one of the most celebrated rituals of all indigenous Rajbansi and *Nashya sheikh* communities. It is celebrated in every year in the month of June and July. This is celebrated on the first day of planting of paddy.²⁷ This paddy planting method is done through special materials, likes - one black shrimp, banana tree, *teoya* tree, jute tree, which are

planted on the rituals field. It was arranged with five to seven banana pieces of casserole and five pieces of *kajal* and *sindoor* were given to each. With it, a straw-shaped fire was set on fire. Then the *Borashala* rice seedlings are planted. Five to seven saplings were planted. Gold and silver were given in a glass of water from five to seven trees. This practice is called as Gochorpana.²⁸ Then they would go straight to the house with all the extra belongings. Looking back, it was forbidden. Then all the materials were kept in the north house of the house. They came home and drank milk first. On that day, there will be one kind of pulses (*Maskalai*) and black turtles as vegetables on the menu. At meal time it is necessary to take rice pulse vegetables. Nothing can be taken later. Nashya sheikh people have been practicing this ritual from the predecessor. The purpose of this ritual is to improve the yield of paddy cultivation.²⁹

The basic premise and origin of folklore is the observance of worldly things. Since this area is the main area of agriculture, most folklore is the product of agricultural products. The original form of folklore is the prayer of the abundance of objects or animals that are involved with agriculture. This is the folklore that the goddess is remembered for or those for whom it is observed, all of them are non-Aryan gods.³⁰

The main purpose of this ritual is to worship of goddess Lakshmi to produce more rice. At that time there was no way for humans to do so if there were insects and various diseases in paddy. Therefore, people desire the fasts of the Goddess. So, they used to do this. This ritual is observed when the paddy crop is ripe to emerge from the paddy tree during the *Ashwanior Kartik*, (in the Bengali month) planting of paddy in the month of *Ashar*. A farmer and his family observed this ritual. This is celebrated in the Kartiksankranti. On this day, a small *Chalais* given to the rice paddy and this is usually made of jute. Many people make this *Chalawith* straw. Women in the house wipe the door of the house. Apart from that, lemon leaves and puffed rice are sprinkled on each paddy field. It burns the soil lamp with every field. Duck is sacrificed to the paddy field for worship. This duck meat is brought home and cooked and eaten all but the head of the duck is given to the goddess for worship. This duck's head is cooked in a new clay bone and is worshiped.³¹ Roaming around the paddy field and calling goddess Lakshmi by lighting the lamp at night or lighting a fire in a bundle of jute. This time of paddy is called catching up paddy. The practice of performing this behaviour when catching up paddy on the paddy tree. This call is called thus—

“khatolangoldighalish.

Hamardhanerboroboro shish

Saroisaroi

Hanserdimakchurfuti

*Ai maalakhihamarveeti.”*³²

(i.e., “Short plough consisting with longer ploughstilt.

Sprout of our paddy is long long?

Pipkinpipkin

Egg of Duck and Edible Root.

Comes Laxmi towards us.”)

Thus, the treatment is carried out in the pond through the openings of banana trees from the paddy field. The house is celebrated on the eve of the entire observance. The ritual of *Baribandhais* called *Hawkdak*. The last *Ashwin* is called *Hawk* and 1st *Kartik* is called *Dak*. On the day of the *hawk*, the farmer went to the field and tied up all his land. So, that the groundwater does not run out. It is done by men and in the house; women tie the straw or banana tree to tree.

Cow bathing folk practices were prevalent among people of all communities. All the cows are bathed on that day. Then oil and semen are fed on the cow horn by rubbing oil all over the body.³³ Women in the house worship the cows and enter the cows at night. Cowshed is given special status by burning incense at night. It is customary to feed pumpkins to cows these days. This *BAKHAR JAUNI* is a medicine of various diseases of cow. If it feeds, the cow will remain healthy throughout the year. This is one of the main purposes of cattle-eating behavior. This folklore is celebrated on the day before of worship of goddess *KALI* and the night of worship of goddess *KALI*. All the devotees are bathed and became pure and worshiped the god with a *ATHIYA* (special banana) banana. At night the rose is fed and bowed out again in the morning. This folklore is called worship of cow. In this folklore cowshed are well coated with raw cow dung. Then two statues of *Garhiya* and *Gorhiani* were erected. These two statues are presented in front of bananas, duck eggs, smear with minium. Besides these, milk, puffed rice and *ATHIYA* bananas are worshiped with *PRASAD*. This is cow folklore. This folklore is for cultivating of agricultural land. It is the belief that the fruit will be more in the paddy tree. This folklore is called a house-bound because on this day, the branches of the thorny bushes and the leaves of poisonous trees are tied in the house. As a result, mosquitoes will not enter the house. Such faith works. Cows want to cultivate land. These are two important resources. Cows and land had a special role to play in the survival of people. This is where people used to practice folklore along with land.³⁴

At present, the various practices and beliefs of the Nashya Sheikh community of North Bengal are facing destruction due to various reasons for the so-called modernity. On the other hand, for religious reasons, in the community of Nashya Sheikh, the influence of the Islamic culture is gradually being lost. Gocharpana practices are currently on the verge of destruction because of the change in paddy cultivation as a result of modern competitive crop production. People no longer practice it, because now people do not cultivate paddy only once in a year. Now it has lost its importance due to the production of crops, three to four times in a year. On the other hand, the Nashya sheikh community has lost its importance as there is not being mentioned of the observance of the law in Islamic *Shariah* law. The

practice of *Hariguri or Serosero* is also lost its importance today, as a result of using of different modern chemical fertilizers and medicine. It has increased the production of crops as well as, the use of various kinds of medicine to protect the crops from insect, spiders and several diseases. As a result, the attitude of people has changed. The practice of *Guruchumanis* also not observed in this way because the use of modern tools, techniques and equipments in the cultivation has greatly reduced the use of cow of the cultivation in the society. On the other hand, as the Islamic fundamentalist spirit has grown into the intoxicated in Nashya Sheikh Community and people have abandoned non-Islamic practices and beliefs in the wake of the infiltration of Islamic customs. Thus, the culture and belief of the Nashya Sheikh community is also in crisis today due to the influence of modernity and the Islamic law.³⁵

Based on the above discussion, we can see that although there are non-Islamic practices and beliefs prevailing in the Nashya Sheikh community, it is almost destroyed today. Today, a very small section of families of villages in different districts of North Bengal are still practicing *Gocharapana, Hariguri, Garuchumani* and keeping faith. Because they thought that these practices and beliefs were being practiced by their ancestors. Therefore, they do not believe that these practices and beliefs are in religious law.

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³⁰*Ibid.*

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