



Folk Festivals and Community Life in Paschim Medinipur

Sk. Aptafuddin Ahmed¹ & Dr. Sushma Gari²

1. Research Scholar, Y.B.N University, Ranchi
2. Associate Professor, Y.B.N University, Ranchi

Abstract:

Paschim Medinipur, located in the south-western part of West Bengal, is a region rich in folk traditions and cultural expressions. This paper explores the folk festivals celebrated in the district and their role in shaping community life, social cohesion, and cultural identity. Drawing from field observations, interviews, and secondary sources, the study highlights how traditional festivals such as Jhumur, Bharni, Sohrai, Sitala Puja, Saraswati Puja, and others function as vehicles of cultural preservation, collective memory, and inter-community dialogue. The research reveals that these festivals not only hold religious and artistic value but also reinforce social norms, enhance community participation, and sustain indigenous knowledge systems.

Keywords: Folk Festivals, Paschim Medinipur, Community Life, Cultural Identity, Indigenous Traditions.

1. Introduction:

Folk festivals are integral to the cultural fabric of rural India. In Paschim Medinipur, where multiple ethnic groups and tribal communities coexist, festivals serve as platforms for expressing collective values, beliefs, and artistic creativity. These events are more than religious observances; they are **social institutions** that bind communities together, transmit cultural knowledge across generations, and offer space for artistic innovation. This study examines the nature, significance, and impact of folk festivals on community life in Paschim Medinipur.

2. Study Area: Paschim Medinipur

Paschim Medinipur is characterized by diverse geographic and cultural landscapes, including forests, agricultural villages, and tribal settlements. The district is home to several indigenous groups such as the *Santhal, Munda, Orao, and Kheria Sabar*, as well as a majority Bengali population. This cultural plurality is reflected in the variety of folk traditions and festivals celebrated throughout the year.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach:

- *Field observations* during major festivals (2019–2023)
- *Semi-structured interviews* with community elders, folk artists, and local scholars

- *Secondary review* of literature, government reports, and ethnographic records

Data were analyzed thematically to understand patterns of festival practices and their social functions.

4. Folk Festivals of Paschim Medinipur:

Folk festivals of Paschim Medinipur reflect its rich tribal and rural heritage. Celebrations like **Tusu Parab**, **Sohrai**, **Bharni**, **Jhumur Utsav**, and **Sitala Puja** combine music, dance, rituals, and communal feasting. These festivals express gratitude to nature, strengthen village unity, and preserve indigenous traditions across generations.

4.1 Sohrai:

Sohrai is a harvest festival celebrated after the agricultural cycle. It involves communal feasting, cattle worship, and decorative art on homestead walls known as *Sohrai painting*. This festival signifies gratitude toward nature and agricultural prosperity.

4.2 Sitala Puja:

Observed during the summer months, Sitala Puja is dedicated to the goddess Sitala, believed to protect against smallpox and infectious diseases. The festival involves ritual offerings, folk songs, and community feasting.

4.3 Jhumur Festival:

Jhumur is both a folk dance form and a festival of artistic expression. The performance involves rhythmic dance, traditional instruments such as *dhamsa* and *mandar*, and songs that narrate local folk tales, love stories, and agricultural life.

4.4 Bharni:

Bharni is a post-harvest festival marked by dance, music, and communal gatherings. The festival strengthens village ties and provides space for youth to engage in cultural performance.

4.5 Saraswati Puja:

Beyond its religious dimension, Saraswati Puja in Paschim Medinipur is a cultural event where students, artists, and villagers participate in music, poetry recitals, and folk performances celebrating knowledge and creativity.

5. Community Functions of Folk Festivals:

Folk festivals strengthen community bonds by bringing people together in collective celebration and shared rituals. They preserve cultural identity, transmit traditions to younger generations, and encourage social harmony among diverse groups. Festivals also support local artists and artisans, promote economic activity, and reinforce shared values, beliefs, and mutual cooperation within rural society.

5.1 Cultural Identity and Continuity:

Festivals act as custodians of **indigenous traditions**. Through songs, dances, and rituals performed during festivals, cultural knowledge is passed to younger generations.

5.2 Social Integration:

Folk festivals foster unity among different castes and tribes. The collective celebrations break down social barriers and promote inter-community harmony.

5.3 Economic and Artistic Engagement:

Folk artists, craft workers, and musicians find platforms during festival seasons to showcase their skills, contributing to local economy and artistic livelihood.

5.4 Ritual and Belief Systems:

Rituals associated with festivals reinforce shared belief systems that provide psychological stability and social coherence within communities.

6. Challenges to Folk Festivals:

Despite their vitality, folk festivals face several threats:

- Modernization and urbanization
- Decline of traditional patronage
- Loss of indigenous languages and performance skills
- Commercialization of cultural forms

Local organizations and scholars advocate documentation, community workshops, and integration of folk art in education to sustain these traditions.

7. Discussion:

The study highlights that folk festivals in Paschim Medinipur transcend mere celebration; they are lived experiences that shape community values, collective memory, and resilience. While global influences bring change, these festivals continue to be vital in negotiating identity and belonging among rural populations.

8. Conclusion:

Folk festivals are indispensable to the cultural life of Paschim Medinipur. They preserve historical memory, strengthen community bonds, and sustain artistic expressions. Recognizing their socio-cultural importance is crucial for policy initiatives aimed at cultural preservation and rural development.

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