



Fish as an Epitome of a Rich Cultural History: Documenting the Cultural and Socio-religious Practices Surrounding Fish in Fish-loving Bengali Societies

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Abstract

It is not just about a fine luncheon packed with omega-3 fatty acids and proteins that a fish caters to us. Rather it is like an intense passion for the fish rising from the deepest part of a *Mecho* Bengali's (Bengali people who love to eat fish) heart which goes to the extent of being reflected as an eye-catching moment in a wedding or in a temple where fish plays a significant role ranging from its rituals to recipes. We, the Bengali people, not only use fish in our food but also worship them. Fish is considered very auspicious and lucky before starting something good and important in our life as the fish (one of the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu) becomes the rescuer of all living beings during the time of the great flood as is stated in the '*Matsya Purana*'. Since ancient times fish has been considered a symbol of divine power and luck. This paper has put forward an honest effort to develop an understanding of the social, cultural, and religious significance of fish in Bengali societies. From economic importance in the fishing industry to folklore, mythology, religion, art, and literature, fish plays a significant role. In a wedding, there are some rituals related to fish starting from the Tatta to the bride's welcoming day and then there is a sudden shift in this discourse. And this shift is found in the fish *bhog* tradition that the paper has also tried to brief in this very discourse.

Keywords: Bengali societies, *bhog* tradition, fish, Matsya Purana, wedding.



[Life Below Water](#)

Introduction

India is and always has been singled out as a unique land that is well worth the (mis) representations from its distant neighbours by virtue of its heterogeneity that does not spare even the bloody flesh of fish from being offered as oblation in the sacred, religious ritualistic practices regarded as imparting divine grace in Hinduism. Bengal is most likely the only region that truly caters to the country's outstanding legacy by leaving an indelible mark through its rich cultural history— an all-embracing

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confluence of religions, traditions, customs, and beliefs now deemed as Intangible Cultural Heritage.

As soon as we hear about a *Bangali* (Bengali), almost all of us think of a famous Bengali proverb and that is “*mache bhate bangali*” (Rice and fish make a Bengali). Food, especially fish, is something that is stereotypically synonymous with the Bengalis. Whether it be Durga puja, weddings, or even funerals, fish is an integral part of our rituals, customs, and daily life. The food habits of the people throw light on the geographical and climatic conditions of the land. It further has an impact on social and religious customs. Generally, people in a region eat what is available around them easily. Earlier, fishing was the principal activity of people who lived near the coast. Bengali literature, sculptures, and paintings of the earlier times suggest that fishing was one of the primary occupations of the people of Bengal. So, the fertile land and accessibility of food and water made the people settle around the rivers. As the population of fish was increasing day by day in the waterbody which made them unusable, people started eating fish abundantly, and some of them made it an occupation. And habits eventually become tradition, and tradition becomes a culture and, therefore, it controls the behaviour of the whole society.

Fish has been a constant part of the rituals and beliefs of the world's major cultures and religions be it Hinduism, Buddhism, or Christianity. The cultural impact of fish has been seen on a large scale that cannot be treated separately. Fish has been mentioned as a protector, a sacred and auspicious creature, a symbol of beauty, and a symbol of luck as well. The folk tales, stories, novels, oral myths, traditions, astrology, and so on have been deeply influenced by fish. India is home to the world's oldest cultures and religions. In Hinduism, many species are considered sacred and are worshipped due to their association with deities. For example, Lord Shiva, one of the three trinities in Hinduism, is also known as Pashupatinath which can be translated as Lord of all animals or beings. Mahseer (Tor species), which is prominent in the Savitri River of the Western Ghats, is regarded as the child of the goddess Parvati (Das, 2014).

And now when we come back to Bengali culture, fish has become such an integral part of Bengalis that their sight is considered lucky. From weddings to any auspicious event, fish holds immense significance in a Bengali house. But what is the reason behind this very thought that holds that the fish is considered very sacred and auspicious? To answer this very question, we must look back to the past, specifically during the time of the *Pralaya*— the great flood. The earliest reference to Fish in Indian writing is found in the *Vedas* and the *Puranas*. The *Matsya Purana* is one of the eighteenth major Puranas, and this old text narrates the story of Matsya, one of the ten avatars (incarnations) of Lord Vishnu. Fishes are considered sacred as they are associated with Lord Vishnu, whose first incarnation on Earth was in the form of a fish.

According to history, the sage king Satyavrata (or Manu), who was righteous and a follower of Dharma, was doing Pitri Tarpana in a waterbody and noticed a tiny fish in his palms and the fish requested him not to throw it away but keep in his '*Kamanadolu*' lest the other big fishes would swallow it in the water. But as the days went by, the tiny fish was gradually getting bigger and it felt difficulty in breathing. Seeing such a

situation, he put the tiny fish in a bigger vessel. The tiny fish soon became as big as the size of a river and this enlargement continues further and further. Satyavrata finally transferred the huge fish to an ocean before recognizing it as none other than Lord Vishnu. He bowed down before the fish and prayed to Him and thanked the Lord for his presence. The Fish then took the form of the Lord with the lower half remaining as that of the fish and blessed the sage king, Manu. The Lord then told the king that due to the upcoming Pralaya (great flood or deluge); the world will be submerged and due to the lapse of good deeds and dominance of evil, he has incarnated as Matsya. He also informed the king to bring together the Saptarishis, seeds of all plants, food grains, a pair of all animals and birds, king of snakes Vasuki as well as the knowledge book *Vedas* to reach the peak of the mountain where he will find a huge boat on which he has to transfer everyone and everything during the time of the great flood. Thus, in this incarnation, Lord Vishnu is believed to have saved the first human on Earth (Kumari, 2023). Matsya (fish) becomes the chauffeur or the sculler of the large boat during the great flood. The fish was presented as the exterminator of obstacles, the rescuer, and a guide to lead the way during the great flood. It was also presented as a preserver of all life forms. And, this upholds the importance of seeing a fish before beginning a day or starting any task or any auspicious event in Hinduism to expect propitious results.

From weddings, puja, and daily lifestyle to even funerals (*matsyamukhi*) fish plays a significant role in Bengali rituals and cultures. As the season of weddings is here and the families of Bengali brides and grooms are getting ready for the wedding rituals where the fish plays an important role starting from the wedding rituals let us now take a look at the different stories and their meanings behind these rituals related to the fish which hold the significant aspects of a wedding. Every culture has its wedding traditions. Let us discuss some of the wedding rituals involving fish which can be started from *Tatta* in Bengali weddings.

So, following this, on the morning of the wedding day, there is a ceremony which is called "*Gaye Holud*" (*Haldi* ceremony or turmeric bath) performed by the bride's family. In this ceremony, the groom's family sends *Tatta* to the bride's family along with the turmeric paste to be used by the groom. The *Tatta* consists of several gifts along with a Rohu fish that is dressed like a bride, draped in a gorgeous silk *saree* and adorned with jewellery, nath (nose-pin), turmeric paste, *sindoor* (vermilion), and red veil (red Churni). It is a way that expresses their best wishes for the bride as she is going to begin her new life as a bride. One has always heard that Bengalis consider fish to be very auspicious, and it is customary for them to eat fish before starting a new journey or before attending an important day or event. On the auspicious occasion of a wedding, there is a belief that sending fish in a *tatta* symbolizes good luck, well wishes, and happiness. As weddings mark a significant journey in our lives, this tradition holds special meaning. It is a popular belief among the Bengalis that a fish dressed as a bride symbolizes fertility.

On welcoming the bride in her in-law's home there is another ritual performed by the bride. On this occasion, the bride must look at the fish and the vessels in plenty, and

that ritual is considered very auspicious for a bride who is due to start a new beginning in her new home. The next morning after coming to her in-law's home, a ritual is performed by the bride. On this occasion, the bride must cut the belly of the fish and this very ritual holds the story of a king. And the story shows that once upon a time there was a rich King but he lost all his wealth and it is said that all his wealth was eaten by a fish. After that, the king was married to a very poor woman so she was not accepted by the king's family. But one day she came to know about the fish. Then she caught the fish and cut it open and took out all the lost treasures from the fish's belly. Since then, it has been believed that a new bride brings wealth to the family with her arrival into the house (Munshi, 2023).

Now, let us look at the sudden shift of this discourse. Generally, it is seen that in an environment with a wedding vibe, fish makes a pivotal contribution ranging from its rituals to recipes. But suppose one goes to a temple to worship and after doing the worship the prasad (oblation) is given to all the people over there. But what will be one's immediate reaction if he or she gets fish curry or something cooked with fish in the form of that Prasad? So, naturally, our minds will be overwhelmed with surprises. Though sounds unreal, in Tarapith temple Maa Tara is worshipped and offered various kinds of foodstuffs as Prasad along with fish. Now the discussion is in transit straight from the wedding rituals and recipes to the fish *bhog* tradition observed in some of the temples based on Cooch Behar which was once a princely state and now under the Jalpaiguri division of West Bengal. Being a heritage town, it has become a melting pot of numerous temples and loadstones such as the Royal Palace.

Madan Mohan Bari Temple

Cooch Behar has always been a land of temples. Madan Mohan Bari is situated right in the heart of the Cooch Behar district and it was constructed under Maharaja Nripendra Narayan from 1885 to 1889. It is one of the most famous temples in the region. The temple is devoted to Lord Krishna and Balaram. The deities include Lord Madan Mohan, Ma Dakkhina Kali, Maa Tara, and Maa Bhabani.

As goddess Kali, known as Ma Tara, is worshipped here so from the very beginning there was always a light of hope of knowing that of the fish *bhog* tradition. And for that, the author visited the temple and talked with the Rajpurohit (the royal worshipper) of Modon Mohan Bari, Shri Hirendranath Bhattacharya, and became enriched with plentiful information about the fish *bhog* tradition which is practiced in this temple. So, according to him, since the time of the Maharajas, Maa Tara along with Lord Modon Mohan, goddess Dakshina Kali, and goddess Bhavani have been worshipped here. As the ritualistic worshipping is performed here according to the Shakto tradition, sacrifice is a major part of the rituals. Goats, sheep, ducks, numerous pigeons, tortoises, and most importantly fish are offered during the ritual sacrificing. At the time of Dipanwita Amabasya Boro Tara Maa is worshipped in the Kathamiya Mandir. But now Magur mach (catfish) is used as an alternative to the tortoise. Along with these, roasted fish (either striped snakehead or *Shol mach*) is offered as oblation to Maa Tara. He stated that fish is not offered to Tara Maa during the time of her daily

worshipping but if anyone wants to offer fish to the deity, they can offer it. He also stated that on some special occasions, Ashjukto Mach is offered to Maa Dakkhina Kali. It is said that macher aash (fish's scales) signifies protection, and as we get protection from God maybe offering Ashjukto Mach to the deity reflects this conception.

According to another purohit or pandit of the Madan Mohan Bari temple, Shri Khogopoti Misra, on the first Tuesday of the month of Baishakh goddess Mangal Chandi Puja is observed inside the temple of Madan Mohan Bari. The following Tuesday of this very month is meant for the sacrifice to appease Maa Mangal Chandi and the day after this sacrifice fish is offered as the main oblation. This twofold ritual of offering sacrifice as well as serving the fish as oblation the later day is observed in the entire month of *Baishakh*.

Regarding the reasons for offering fish *bhog* to the goddesses, Rajpurohit of the temple Shri Hirendranath Bhattacharya said that fish is considered very auspicious and now the main concern of the people only revolves around what is good for them. And it is seen in Jagadhatri Puja rituals. At the time of *Adhibas Kirto*, one pair of *puti mach* (Puntius fish) along with *doi* (curd) and *mishti* (sweetmeats) are placed in front of goddess Jagadhatri. It is believed that watching these fishes before the puja is considered very auspicious.

Bara Debi Bari Temple

Boro Devi is a special form of Goddess Durga worshipped by the Cooch Behar royal family. This Durga puja is started from the Shukla Ashtami of Shravan month. During the time of Navami puja, Mahabhog is offered to the goddess Durga and this Mahabhog includes a dish made with meat, fish, vegetables, rice, and dal. Sacrifice is a major part of the Boro Devi puja. Goats, pigeons, and catfishes are sacrificed here. He also said that if there is no Boal Mach (Sheat Fish) available to offer Boro Devi Maa then any Ashjukto Mach (Fish with scale) is used as a substitute for this.

There is a famous Bengali saying that is '*macher raja ilish*' (Hilsa is the king of fish). And whenever Hilsa comes to this very discourse then the Saraswati Puja which is the epicenter of all these discussions, becomes the Bengali's favourite catch. It is said that from this day on people start eating hilsa fish and it continues till the Durga Puja. On this auspicious day of Saraswati Puja, some Bengalis offer '*jora ilish*' (a pair of hilsa fish) to the goddess of wisdom and knowledge.

And this tradition has its roots in East Bengal. Firstly, people apply mustard oil and turmeric on the fish and then they put some *sindoor* (vermilion) on it after that the fish is cooked by mixing all the spices but the process of cooking is different from regular hilsa cooking. According to the custom, people avoid hilsa-eating from October to February and coincidentally, it is believed that Dashami is the last day of the hilsa-eating season. On the day of Dashami, hilsa or rohu fish is offered to Maa Durga as curry or fried in *hog*. As per religious beliefs, the roasted fish keeps evil eyes away at the sea and ensures Maa Durga's safe journey back to her husband's abode Kailash. A food blogger Indrajit Lahiri said that "a large number of Bangals stop eating ilish after

Durga Puja and resume only on Vasanta Panchami. This is perhaps because of the fact that you don't get good *ilish* during this time" (Shamayita, 2020).

'*Shal mach*', also called a '*big-headed snake fish*' or simply a striped snakehead fish, is believed to be one of the *vahanas* or vehicles emblematic of Ghater Mashan, one of the many types of Masan Baba, a folk deity of benevolent and/or malevolent nature worshipped mainly by the Rajbanshi community in North Bengal, especially in the Dinhata subdivision of Cooch Behar district. Every year on the first day of the Bengali month *Jaishto* (May-June) a fair is organized centering the annual worship of Masan Baba in the village named Alokjhari at Gosanimari under this very subdivision. The God, worshipped in this very temple by the name Garkata Masan as well as Alokjhari Masan, is the most primordial and popular one among its other equivalents forming one hundred twenty-six in total while in the district itself, only twenty-eight of its equivalents are found to be worshipped. The Rajbanshi community believe that the different forms of Masan Baba can cause different harm to people of different ages such as spreading several diseases and bringing about natural calamities and, in a bid, to get rid of these diseases and calamities they started to worship Masan Baba.

If someone is attacked by the spirit of Pora Masan or Angra Khoa Masan and Dura Masan the afflicted person wants to eat burnt charcoal, earthen oven soil. He or she mostly avoids cooked meals and prefers fried and half-burnt vegetables, dry fish, etc. If possessed by this deity, people offer unburned curd, parched rice, flattened rice, half-fried rice (*bhurbhura bhaja*), big seeded plantain, and half-burnt small black-snake-headed fish (*caeng mach bhaja*) to appease the deity. Picila Masan is one of the forms of Masan Baba believed to live in water. The word '*picila*' means slippery. The spirit of this deity is said to attack those who live near the river bank or visit the Ghats. It may live in a shiny place too. A person may be considered possessed by this deity if, at the time of fishing, he catches a fish but gets frightened by its sight or touch, and eventually the fish slips out of his hand, and as a result, he may get a fever. It is also known as Tisila Masan.

As mythology goes, goddess Kali is the daughter of Dharma Thakur and out of her eighteen sons the eldest one who is the source of the equestrian supreme power, is Masan Baba. Another strand continues by saying that the god sprang from the beads of sweat of the goddess Kali when she was dancing in a trance. It was also believed that once Maa Kali went to take a bath in a river when Dharma Thakur suddenly appeared before her and it was after their union Masan Baba was born. The name then given to Him was Pitchla Masan. Many people particularly those belonging to the Rajbanshi community believe that Masan Baba sprang from the matted locks of Lord Shiva. As legends describe, Sati who was the favourite child of Daksha, marries Shiva against her father's wishes. After Daksha humiliates her and her husband, Sati kills herself in the yajna (Fire-Sacrifice) to protest against him and uphold the honour of her husband. Deeply hurt by the death of His wife, Shiva performed the destructive Tandava dance. And during that time some of the hair from His matted locks fell on earth from which the God is believed to have sprung. According to the Rajbanshi community, the God was born on Saturday in the Bengali month of Bhadra and it was

believed that after His birth the kundali was thrown into the river and it was from His kundali water spinach (kalmi saag) was grown as a vegetable. This is the reason that the Rajbanshi people avoid eating water spinach in the month of Bhadra.

There is a small village named Trimohini near Sahebganj under the Dinhata subdivision where there is a temple of Masan Baba which is revered by the name Khyataora Masan. The specialty of this temple is the ingredients that the local people vow to the god with, such as needle and thread, to have their wishes fulfilled. Masan Baba is accompanied by various mounts concerning His nature, forms, and their individual worship including tortoise, pig, striped snakehead fish (shall mach), and sheep. Masan Baba has not yet achieved the status of a home deity and so is worshipped outside the territory of the house — sometimes under a Banyan or Sheora tree or sometimes in a small house made of corrugated iron. Though modern medical science is improving day by day, the worship of Masan Baba is followed earnestly by the Rajbanshi community.

Conclusion

To conclude, the food habits of the people of Bengal set an impact on their social and religious customs. Not only in Bengali culture but fish has also been a constant part of the rituals and beliefs of the world's major cultures and religions since time immemorial. India has been getting enriched day by day with the great influences of these indigenous cultures and traditions which mostly find their origin in oral exchange from the pandits, general people, and from the old texts.

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