

Modernization and Women's Evolving Roles in Cultural Heritage: Exploring Coastal Bengal from 1900 to 2020

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the transformative impact of modernization on women's roles in preserving cultural heritage in Bengal's coastal region between 1900 and 2020. Traditionally the custodians of oral traditions, rituals, and indigenous crafts, women have increasingly integrated modern economic activities and digital technologies into heritage preservation practices. Drawing on historical, ethnographic, and literature review methodologies, the research explores the effects of social reforms, education, and globalization on traditional cultural practices. Findings indicate that empowerment programs, market innovations, and digital platforms have enabled women to balance tradition with contemporary demands, ensuring cultural sustainability. The study offers insights for policy interventions aimed at reinforcing the adaptive capacities of women in heritage management. These findings deepen understanding of interplay between tradition and modernity.

Keywords: *Modernization, Women's Roles, Cultural Heritage, Bengal, Coastal Region, Oral Traditions, Indigenous Crafts, Digital Platforms, Globalization, Social Reforms.*

I. Introduction

Modernization has significantly influenced women's roles in preserving cultural heritage in Bengal's coastal region from 1900 to 2020. Traditionally, women were the custodians of oral traditions, rituals, and indigenous crafts. Social reforms, education, and economic changes have reshaped their participation, balancing tradition with modern livelihoods. While globalization and urbanization have posed challenges, women have adapted by revitalizing folk arts, rituals, and heritage tourism. Empowerment programs have further strengthened their role in cultural sustainability. This study explores how modernization has transformed women's engagement in heritage preservation, highlighting their evolving contributions amidst socio-economic and technological advancements over the past century (*Ghosh, 2014; Hoque, 2022; Sharda, 2023*).

1.1 Traditional Role of Women in Cultural Heritage Preservation

Women have long been the custodians of cultural heritage in Bengal's coastal region, playing a pivotal role in preserving oral traditions, rituals, and indigenous crafts. Their contributions span various aspects of cultural transmission, ensuring the continuity of ancestral knowledge across generations (*Hoque, 2022; Ghosh, 2014*).

Oral Traditions and Folklore: Women have traditionally been the primary storytellers in families and communities. Through songs, folktales, and ballads, they have preserved myths, legends, and historical narratives that define regional identity. These oral traditions not only entertain but also serve as moral and ethical guides, instilling cultural values in younger generations. In many fishing and agrarian communities, women sing work songs and lullabies that embed collective memories and wisdom (*Musa & Feng, 2016; Kottakkunnummal, 2015*).

Religious and Social Rituals: Women play a crucial role in performing and maintaining religious rituals and community festivals. They lead household ceremonies such as Lakshmi Puja, Bonbibi rituals in the Sundarbans, and seasonal harvest celebrations. These practices reinforce communal bonds and ensure the transmission of sacred customs. Women also act as ritual specialists, guiding younger members in prayers, fasting traditions, and the use of natural elements in worship (*Kottakkunnummal, 2015; Santhosh & Paleri, 2021*).

Indigenous Crafts and Artistic Heritage: Women have been central to Bengal's indigenous crafts, such as weaving, pottery, kantha embroidery, and patachitra scroll painting. These crafts not only hold artistic significance but also reflect regional history and social narratives. Traditionally, women handcrafted textiles and household items, often embedding symbolic patterns that carried stories of migration, folklore, and devotion. Such artistic expressions remain vital in preserving cultural heritage while adapting to contemporary markets. Thus, women have historically played an indispensable role in safeguarding and transmitting cultural heritage in Bengal's coastal communities, ensuring its survival despite socio-economic transformations (*Sharda, 2023; Ghosh, 2014*).

1.2 Impact of Social Reforms and Education

Influence of Reform Movements: Social reform movements in Bengal, particularly in the early 20th century, played a crucial role in improving women's status and their role in cultural preservation. Reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and organizations like the Brahma Samaj and Hindu Mahila Samiti advocated for women's rights, including widow remarriage, abolition of child marriage, and gender equality in religious practices. These movements empowered women to participate more actively in cultural and religious traditions, ensuring the continuation of heritage while promoting progressive values (*Kottakkunnummal, 2015; Santhosh & Paleri, 2021*).

Women's Access to Education: Increased access to education enabled women to document and formalize traditional knowledge, preserving oral histories, folklore, and indigenous crafts. Schools and universities introduced courses on literature, music, and art, encouraging women to engage in

academic and artistic preservation of their heritage. Educated women also took leadership roles in cultural organizations, publishing works on traditional practices and advocating for their protection. This transformation helped bridge the gap between tradition and modernity, reinforcing women's role as heritage custodians in evolving societal structures (*Hoque, 2022; Ghosh, 2014*).

1.3 Effects of Economic and Technological Changes

Economic Development and Changing Roles: Economic growth and industrialization in Bengal's coastal region have transformed women's participation in cultural heritage preservation. Traditionally engaged in indigenous crafts and household-based cultural practices, many women have shifted to income-generating activities, including handicrafts for commercial markets and tourism. The rise of self-help groups (SHGs) and microfinance initiatives has empowered women to monetize traditional arts like kantha embroidery and patachitra painting, ensuring both economic stability and cultural continuity. However, the focus on commercial production has sometimes led to modifications in traditional designs to suit market demands, altering the authenticity of cultural heritage (*Sharda, 2023; Ghosh, 2014*).

Technological Advancements and Digital Preservation: The introduction of technology has significantly influenced how women engage with cultural heritage. Digital platforms and social media have provided new opportunities for documenting and sharing folk traditions, music, and crafts, allowing women to reach a global audience. Online training programs and e-commerce platforms have further enabled them to sustain traditional livelihoods while adapting to modern economic systems. However, the shift towards technology-driven preservation also risks reducing the personal and community-based transmission of cultural knowledge, as younger generations increasingly rely on digital archives rather than direct oral instruction (*Musa & Feng, 2016; Rawichutawan, 2019*).

1.4 Challenges of Globalization and Urbanization

Threats to Traditional Practices: Globalization and urbanization have led to the erosion of traditional cultural practices in Bengal's coastal region. Mass migration to cities, industrialization, and changing lifestyles have reduced the time and space for rituals, folklore, and indigenous crafts. Younger generations, influenced by modern education and global culture, often view traditional practices as outdated, leading to a decline in their transmission. Additionally, mechanization and mass production have marginalized handmade crafts like kantha embroidery and patachitra painting, threatening their authenticity and sustainability. The commercialization of festivals and rituals has further shifted focus from cultural significance to economic gain (*Rossi, 2018; Santhosh & Paleri, 2021*).

Women's Adaptation Strategies: Despite these challenges, women have adopted innovative strategies to preserve cultural heritage. Many have leveraged digital platforms to document and promote traditional arts, music, and storytelling. Government and NGO-led initiatives have supported women artisans through skill development programs and market access, ensuring that traditional crafts remain economically viable. Community-based cultural organizations have also

emerged, encouraging women to teach and pass down rituals and folklore to younger generations. Through integrating traditional knowledge with modern economic and technological systems, women continue to play a vital role in safeguarding Bengal's rich cultural heritage amidst globalization and urbanization (*Musa & Feng, 2016; Rawichutiwan, 2019*).

1.5 Empowerment and Cultural Sustainability

Role of Empowerment Programs: Various government and non-government initiatives have played a crucial role in empowering women to sustain and revitalize cultural heritage. Programs promoting self-help groups (SHGs), microfinance, and cooperative models have enabled women artisans to market their traditional crafts globally. Organizations like the West Bengal Khadi & Village Industries Board and NGOs have provided training in weaving, embroidery, and folk art, ensuring economic independence while preserving cultural identity. Additionally, policies supporting women's participation in cultural tourism and heritage management have strengthened their role as cultural ambassadors (*Sharda, 2023; Ghosh, 2014*).

Revitalization of Heritage Through Women's Leadership: Women have actively contributed to the revival of folk traditions, rituals, and indigenous crafts through educational and digital initiatives. Online platforms, cultural festivals, and government-backed heritage projects have provided them with opportunities to document and showcase their knowledge. Women-led community groups have also played a pivotal role in preserving oral traditions by organizing storytelling sessions and intergenerational learning programs. Through integrating modern tools with traditional practices, women ensure the sustainability of Bengal's cultural heritage while adapting to contemporary socio-economic realities (*Hoque, 2022; Musa & Feng, 2016*).

II. Review of Literature

Kottakkunnummal, M. (2015). The article examined black and white photographs of poor rural Muslims that had appeared in advertisements and newspaper reports circulated to seek charity. These photographs had been published in the Malayalam newspaper *Chandrika*, which served as the mouthpiece of the Muslim League, a Muslim-identity-based political party in Kerala, South India. The study had attempted to connect politics, charity, and gender by analysing these photographs within the historical context of charity in the Malabar region. Drawing on oral narratives from Ponnani, a coastal town in Malappuram district, Kerala, as well as written history, the article had analysed how political and social aspirations had been historically gendered among Muslims. This had been evident in the visual culture, which had been shaped by the material culture of dress and the ways of covering the body, influencing political and social aspirations, contestations in status, and modes of gendering. The photographs had been discussed as images that broadly invoked religious meanings, cultural values, and memories of the past, particularly for their intended audience wealthy male Muslim readers residing either in the Gulf or in Kerala. In summary, the article had explored how the intersection of politics and charity had cast women as objects of reform and sympathy, presenting them in particular moral frameworks.

Musa, M., & Feng, K. L. (2016). The recognition accorded to George Town as a UNESCO World Heritage Site on 7 July 2008 had introduced a new challenge for the state government in terms of heritage management and town planning. Since the listing had been conducted on the basis of a "living" cultural site, the government had subsequently taken several measures to safeguard the city's intangible cultural heritage. One such initiative had originated from the George Town World Heritage Incorporated (GTWHI), which had launched a pilot oral history documentation project in 2013. Using this project as a case study, the paper aimed to illustrate the role of an oral history project in fostering public awareness and appreciation for heritage while also encouraging community engagement in the heritage discourse.

Mukharji, P. B. (2017). Extant South Asian histories of race, particularly biometrics, had primarily focused on the colonial era, especially the nineteenth century. However, ethnographic accounts had increasingly observed that Indian scientists had enthusiastically embraced the resurgent raciology brought about by genomic research into human variation. What had been notably lacking was a historical account of how raciology had evolved during the late colonial and early postcolonial periods, roughly between the decline of craniometry and the rise of genomics. This history had been the focus of the article, which had argued that anthropometry, rather than being solely a colonial science, had been adopted by Indian nationalists quite early. From the 1920s onward, various forms of biometric nationalism had publicly competed. To challenge the idea that biometric nationalism had been teleologically inevitable, it had been contrasted with an alternative approach called "craftology," which had emerged on the margins of formal academia among scholars practicing what had been termed "vernacular anthropology." Craftology and biometric nationalism had continued to compete, contrast, and selectively intertwine until nearly the end of the twentieth century.

Rossi, B. (2018). Migration had been a central factor in African history, and it was believed that the human species had started spreading across the planet within and outside of Africa between 2 and 2.5 million years ago. Although the earliest stages of human migrations had remained the subject of intense debate, most hypotheses had focused on movements that had taken place within the African continent. In historical times, African migrations had been categorized into two broad sub-fields: those involving people who had been forced to move and those who had chosen to migrate voluntarily. Africa had been the source of the largest forced migrations in history, with the trans-Atlantic slave trade being the most extensive long-distance forced migration, despite occurring over a shorter period than the trans-Saharan and Indian Ocean slave trades. Within Africa, trade across complementary ecological zones and the seasonality of production had driven free migrations of traders and workers engaged in long-distance trade. Following the abolition of slavery and the slave trade, free labour migrations had gained significance. European colonialism had introduced the need for cash, which had often only been accessible in cities and regions specializing in cash crop production, and it had also led to new forms of forced labour for the construction and maintenance of colonial infrastructure. The rise of development as a rationale for governing African societies had influenced migrations in various ways through national and international policies that had sought to channel people's mobility. Over the past two centuries, African migrants had pursued self-development by traveling to places where they had hoped to find better opportunities. However,

contemporary trafficking and displacements caused by wars, intolerance, and natural catastrophes had continued to highlight the persistent role of violence in the experience of African migrants.

Rawichutiwan, A. (2019) combined historical and ethnographical analysis to examine mangrove narratives, discursive practices, and their impacts on the livelihoods of local communities in Thailand. It was stated that mangrove narratives were constructed as generalized statements about the processes, causes, and solutions to mangrove and related environmental degradations, which were accepted as "truths" and assumed to be universally applicable. A critical political ecology approach was used, focusing on the deconstruction of orthodox science and environmental discourse, with mangrove narratives serving as a case study. The research was based on 17 months of fieldwork conducted in Talumphuk, a rural fishing village in southern Thailand, and investigated the links between Thailand's broader political-economic development policies, Western ideologies and influences on the Thai state, mangrove narratives and discursive practices, and their effects on the livelihoods of small-scale fishers. It was traced how the historical roots of scientific forestry and institutions since the colonial period were passed down to present-day mangrove management techniques. The study found that mangrove narratives, initially created in response to mangrove deforestation due to shrimp farming, and later reinforced by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami as a "coastal guardian" strategy, had evolved into discursive practices of mangrove planting and territorialization, further exacerbating the already precarious livelihoods of Talumphuk fishers, particularly among the poor and marginalized groups.

Siriwardane-de Zoysa, R. (2020). The paper highlighted the visibility of infrastructural projects as a means of coastal protection against urban sea level change, emphasizing dyking as both a form of defence and a way of dwelling or living with and from water. By examining the emergence of a recent donor-funded polder dyke in Metro Manila, Philippines, it explored the infrastructural politics of coastal protection in a delta megacity, which had often been technocratically framed as a global disaster capital. It illustrated how, as a socio-technological object, a dyke had functioned as a distinct mode of governing everyday life along high-density urban coastlines. Drawing from Evolutionary Governance Theory (EGT) and infrastructural anthropology, the study traced the materialization of the dyke as an evolving living infrastructure, situating it within broader urban transformations that involved contestations around disaster risk reduction, land use, uneven livelihood access, tenurial rights, and neoliberal aesthetics. To transcend the defence/dwelling binary, the paper presented a typology of four interrelated frames that had been used to examine localized meanings and practices of dyking as a mode of everyday governance, namely: a line of defence for protective living, an urban spectacle, a buffer zone or marker for land acquisition, and a fluid borderland, which at times had disrupted the very material fixities and aqua-terrestrial distinctions upon which hard engineering infrastructural solutions had often been based.

Santhosh, R., & Paleri, D. (2021). The study examined the competing processes of ethnicization among Hindu and Muslim religious communities in the coastal region of Karnataka, South India, within the broader context of the hegemonic rise of Hindu nationalism in the country. It described how various militant Hindutva organizations institutionalized religious vigilantism and violence

against minorities to construct an ethnicized, exclusivist Hindu moral community. This formation of ethno-Hinduism, achieved through the depoliticization of caste inequalities and violence, aimed to naturalize religious differences into an inflexible and exclusivist ethnic identity sustained by continuous enemy-making. In response to this predatory ethnicization by Hindutva organizations, and leveraging the prevailing alienation and anxiety among Muslims in the region, radical Islamic organizations engaged in a counter-predatory ethnicization of Muslim communities. While officially advocating secular positions, these organizations reportedly employed the rhetoric of self-defence and securitization, along with radical Islamic identity for mass mobilization, often mirroring the tactics of Hindutva vigilante groups. The study concluded that these competing ethnicization processes and the rise of a ‘vigilante public’ would have significant implications for democracy, particularly in terms of citizenship and secularism, while exacerbating religious polarization in coastal Karnataka and making peaceful coexistence increasingly difficult.

Hoque, F. (2022). The thesis was an exploration of identity on the borderlands between South and Southeast Asia, specifically establishing the nature of the cultural distinctness of one of the largest ethnic groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in Bangladesh. It examined the historical processes behind the hybridity of this ethnic group and how it eventually came to be under one self-identifying label—the Marma. The study employed various approaches to understand the creation and reproduction of identity, from maintaining cultural boundaries to analysing internal cultural processes through concepts such as creolization, syncretism, and entanglement. These theories suggested a fluid process of reconfiguring and recasting structure or creating order from chaos in response to environmental changes. The research also explored other distinct approaches with similar conceptual outcomes, including theories emphasizing that traditional practices and ethnic identities were continually reinvented according to historical contexts and in response to internal or external pressures. These different perspectives helped piece together the various components of Marma cultural identity. The ethnographic data was presented in three parts, with each section drawing upon relevant theories to analyse field data on the Marma group. Ultimately, the thesis contributed a detailed monograph on borderland cultures and demonstrated the value of applying multiple lenses to study identity in complex regions of the world.

Sharda, D. (2023). The review indicated that most of the urban female workforce had been engaged in the informal sector, with 90% of participants in the domestic worker realm being women. It was noted that Kolkata had been characterized by relatively lower salaries for domestic workers compared to other metropolitan areas, suggesting that such low labour costs had been partly enabled by lapsing labour standards for this demographic. Domestic workers in Kolkata had neither been entitled to adequately decent work conditions nor had they benefitted from specialized social security schemes. Despite the 2019 government notification, which had reiterated a potential avenue for domestic workers to be recognized as unorganized sector workers through registration on official administrative platforms to avail social security, minimum wages, and legal protection, the ground reality had remained drastically different. Operational blockages had hindered access to legal institutions, and earning even a minimum wage had been challenging, with wages significantly lower than the West Bengal government’s recommended rate. The paper had aimed to analyse the

empirical shortcomings in labor standards and the disconnect between legislation and the prevailing status quo in West Bengal, highlighting the unjust exclusion faced by predominantly female domestic workers in Kolkata from basic amenities and secure working environments. Additionally, it had sought to provide policy recommendations based on community mobilization of domestic worker women, cross-sectoral linkages with local institutions, and strategies to improve employer-worker relations.

Ghosh, P. (2014). This research investigated the impacts of biodiversity conservation on the local population living in the Sundarban Biosphere Reserve (SBR). Specifically, it examined the effects of conservation on local fishing communities residing on the edge of the Sundarban Reserve Forest. Additionally, it analysed the causes and characteristics of conflicts between biosphere reserve managers and local fishing communities over resource use. The study also explored the impacts of ecotourism on the local population living on the edge of the Sundarban Tiger Reserve (STR), which formed a significant part of the larger biosphere reserve, with its core area overlapping that of the SBR.

III. Findings from Study

Literature reveals that modernization reshapes heritage preservation through evolving female roles, merging tradition with modern economic and technological practices. Women have historically safeguarded oral narratives, rituals, and indigenous crafts (*Ghosh, 2014; Hoque, 2022*) and now harness digital platforms and market innovations (*Musa & Feng, 2016; Sharda, 2023*). Social reforms and educational advances have further empowered women to document and revitalize cultural legacies (*Kottakkunnummal, 2015; Santhosh & Paleri, 2021*), even as globalization and urbanization challenge authentic transmission (*Rossi, 2018; Rawichutiwan, 2019*). Overall, these studies underscore the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity in contemporary heritage management (*Siriwardane-de Zoysa, 2020; Mukharji, 2017*).

IV. Conclusion

The study reveals that modernization has profoundly reshaped women's roles in preserving Bengal's coastal cultural heritage. As traditional custodians of oral narratives, rituals, and crafts, women have adapted to economic and technological shifts by embracing digital platforms and market initiatives. Empowerment programs and education have bolstered their capacity to balance tradition with emerging livelihoods. However, globalization and urbanization continue to challenge authenticity and intergenerational transmission. Through integrating time-honoured practices with contemporary innovations, women have become pivotal agents of cultural sustainability. Future policies must strengthen support systems to ensure that evolving cultural expressions remain both economically viable and authentically rooted.

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