



The Consuetudinary Raas *Utshav* of Cooch Behar: Unravelling the Idiosyncratic Traditions with Cultural Syncretism

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Abstract: As A.K. Ramanujan in his essay, *Is There any Way of Indian Thinking*, develops the notion of context-sensitivity as an indispensable part of Indian culture. The present study will explore the context behind idiosyncratic Raas tradition of Cooch Behar. *Raas* is a festival of union of devotees and Lord Krishna. But Raas *Utshav* of Cooch Behar stands as a union of religious communities and they take part in the rituals and practices. This writing will explore the oral tradition and historic connection of *Raas Utshav* in Cooch Behar. Raas mela is the most ancient and traditional of all fairs in this region. Every year, the people of Cooch Behar get set to celebrate the Raas Yatra of Madan Mohan *Thakur*. Raas mela celebrations commence from the auspicious day of *Purnima* in the month of *Kartik* according to Bengali Calendar. This Raas mela was celebrated first at Vetaguri, then this festival had been shifted to the Modan Mohan temple of Cooch Behar. How this auspicious festival has come into grandeur and the history behind the festival will be the subject of exploration in this paper. The Raas-Chakra, a semi cylindrical like structure made out of paper and bamboo at the temple lawn is being beautifully decorated over generations by a Muslim family.⁷⁺⁸ The inclusion of the Muslim community in such a Hindu religious festival showcases a great example of communal harmony. How this religious amalgamation come into existence will be the subject of discussion.

Keywords- Tradition, Modan Mohan, Raas Utshav, Raas Chakra, Cultural syncretism, Rituals.

Introduction- Oral tradition is a segment of human society's progression. Oral tradition has become a domain of great interest to scholars of different discursive disciplines today. In the absence of script, it is a complex process of passing the information of people's culture, custom and behaviour from one generation to the next through storytelling. The tradition and rituals are quite often imbued with a sense of place. This paper discusses the rituals and tradition of Cooch Behar's *Raas Yatra* and *Raas Utsav*.

Modan Mohan is one of the names of Sri Krishna's *Ostator Satanam*. Madan Mohan *Thakur* is the family deity of the Koch dynasty. Under the influence of Maharaja Naranarayana Sankardeva, in 1588 AD, Madan Mohan deity was established in the palace. The idol of this deity was placed without his consort Radha. Later, in 1898, Maharaja Nripendra Narayan set up the Madan Mohan idol in the present Madan *Bari* of Cooch Behar. Maharaja Nripendranarayan Bhupbahadur laid the foundation stone of Madan Mohan's *Bari* on the north bank of the Bairagi Dighi on Monday, 8th July 1889, in Bengali calendar 1298. After the completion of the construction of the temple, the work of establishing the deity of the temple began on March 29, 1890. It is believed that Sri Madan Mohan was first worshiped in this dynasty during the reign of Maharaja Naranarayana. From then, until the establishment of the present Madan Mohan temple, there was a system of regular worship in the temple on the premise of the Royal Palace. The present Cooch Behar Polytechnic and BT Evening College were the palaces of the then dynasty. At that time the temples of all the other deities along with Madan Mohan were placed there.²⁺³

In the matter of Madan Mohan Puja of Cooch Behar, a great number of similarities are noticed with the puja and the religious practices of Jagannath Deva of Puri. In the land of Purushottam, Jagannath Dev has no Lakshmi or Radha, just as Madan Mohan has no Radha in Cooch Behar. From Cooch Behar to Assam, the Madan Mohan idol exists without Radha. The rath yatra festival of Madan Mohan Dev in Cooch Behar also follows the date and custom of Jagannath Dev's rath yatra in Puri. In Puri, Jagannath Dev himself is 'Bhairab', and in Cooch Behar, Madan Mohan is the 'Shiva' of 'Bhabani'. Therefore, despite the 'Shiva' worshipping in Cooch Behar, no idol or 'Linga' idol of Shiva can be found in the Madan Mohan temple. So, even on Madan Mohan's throne, Maharaja Biswasingh used to worship a *Kasti Pathar* idol of 'Bhabani' Devi, placed on Madan Mohan's left side. In Puri, Jagannath Deva's *Masima* took half a sip of water from the sea and saved the temple of Jagannath Deva from the flood of the sea. Goddess Ardhasini and Kapal Mochan Shiva are thought to be the guardians of the Jagannath field. The same practice is found in the Rath Yatra festival of Madan Mohan Dev in Cooch Behar. And just to the south of this temple, the abode of Goddess Ardhasini's exists. And this '*Masima*' Ardhasini and Harendraswara are found to be the guardians who saved the city of Cooch Behar from the grip of floods.

Apart from Madan Mohan's regular and special puja, twelve more pujas are performed here according to different auspicious hours. These are called Madan Mohan's twelfth *Jatra*. During this time Madan Mohan *Dev* came out of the sanctum several times and worshiped on the *Varandah*(porch) of the temple. Decorating the *Varandah*(porch) in Madan Mohan's house is called '*Barama*' decoration. These twelfth journeys are 'Chandan Jatra', 'Pushpa Dol Jatra', 'Snan Jatra', 'Rath Jatra', 'Dakshinayan Jatra', 'Shayan Jatra', 'Utthan Jatra', 'Raas Jatra', 'Pusyabhishek Jatra', 'Navashasya Jatra', 'Dol Jatra', and 'Daman Bhajan Jatra'. After the rath yatra, tired Madan Mohan goes to sleep for four months. This sleep journey takes place on the twelfth day of the month of *Ashar*. Bathing and 'Nitya' puja is organized the same as every day. After the evening aarti, there is a special puja. Then Madan Mohan enters into the *Garvagriho* for sleeping. Although the *Choto* Madan Mohan sleeps on another bed next to his bed as a symbol of the *Bara* Madan Mohan. That bed also has a quilt, mattress, pillow, and side pillow. Mosquito nets are beautifully hung, just like in the *Bara* Madan Mohan's teak wooden bed. And the *Bara* Madan Mohan stays on his throne as usual.⁴

In the meantime, the Janmashtami of Sri Krishna is observed in the month of '*Sravana*'. However, at this time 'Jhulan Jatra' is observed everywhere but the exception is Madan Mohan's Bari. The uniqueness of this Cooch Behar Madan Mohan is that here no 'Jhulan Jatra' takes place. When all the Madan Mohan temples across India celebrate this occasion, the Madan Bari of Cooch Behar pays no heed to this occasion. The only reason is that at that time Madan Mohan is in deep sleep, his '*Soyan Jatra*' goes on. No festivals are celebrated here at that time not to disturb his sleep. During these four months of sleep, Madan Mohan turns towards another side of the bed only once. Ceremonially, he has been placed on the other side. This is called '*Parso Poribartan Jatra*'. This side change journey takes place on the twelfth day of the *Shukla Paksha* of the month of '*Bhadra*'.

Four months later, on the twelfth day of the month of '*Kartik*', Madan Mohan wakes up. This is known as the '*Utthan Jatra*'. On that day, after Madan Mohan's bathing, contemplation, and daily puja, he is brought out to the '*Varandah*' for a special puja. There, Madan Mohan brushes his teeth with a mango twig. As he was sleeping for a few months, he did not take bath for a long time; so, he is scrubbed well with mixture of 'Til' and 'Amalaki' and the bath of Madan Mohan takes place in a grand procession. The throne can never be left empty in the sanctum, so *Choto* Madan Mohan is worshiped there in the absence of *Bara* Madan Mohan. On this day, '*Baramas*' are arranged for him at Madan Mohan Bari. At that time Madan Mohan is staying in the '*Varandah*', where his worship is accomplished. The next day, on the thirteenth, he remains on the '*Varandah*'. On the evening of the fourteenth day is the '*Adhibas*', the previous day of the '*Raas Jatra*'.

It is known from the ancient history of Cooch Behar "Rajopakhyan" that this fair was first introduced 169 years ago. To commemorate the day of entry into the palace, he organized a fair at the 'Rajbari' temple on 'Raas Tithi' in addition to various auspicious ceremonies and lighting. Over time, the structure of the fair has been changed and is now known and celebrated as 'Raas mela'. Later, various kings moved the capital, but the festivities of this Raas festival and fair never stopped. According to Astrology, in the beginning time of Raas, Sri Krishna was at eight years two months and twenty-two days old. According to Music, Raas means the united dance of male and female along with a song. Raas Yatra is perhaps the biggest religious festival of North Bengal and held every year in the month of December-January. Raas Yatra has a long tradition in Bengal and the festival is very famous in Cooch Behar. Raas Mela is the core attraction for tourists. It attracts large crowds of people from all over the North Bengal including

neighbouring states like Assam, Bihar, Odisha. Many devotees and tourists come from various place to observe the rich culture of this place.²

That evening of the *Raas Utshav* is celebrated as 'Posar Bhanga'. The 'Pasar' is arranged with milk, water, 'Haritoki', mango leaves, and a bunch of incense sticks in an earthen pot. With that *pasar* in one's head, a man dances around Madan Mohan seven times. At that time various musical instruments are played in the temple. At the end of the circumnavigation, in a strange manner, the man throws the *pasar* in front of Madan Mohan. The man of a particular family has been performing the work of breaking the 'Pasar' over generations. Madan Mohan goes to his room as soon as the ceremony is over. Other idols of Madan Mohan from 'Dangrai' and 'Rajmata' temples in Cooch Behar attain the Madan Bari temple for this Raas. After breaking the 'Pasar', they also move to the small temporary houses on the temple premises.

According to A. K. Ramanujan, the tendency of every culture is either context-sensitive or context-free. From great Indian epics- Ramayana, Mahabharata to all other oral traditions, existence of contexts pervades everywhere. Ramanujan says as "In cultures like India's, the context-sensitive kind of rule is the preferred formulation". Each chapter of Indian epics unfold another meta-story. This tradition of meta-narrative is a unique counterpart of Indian culture. As this tradition is observed during the Raas mela where different postured puppets are arranged for describing mythological stories.⁶ The main event of Madan Mohan Temple is 'Raas Yatra' and the fair held on this occasion is also the largest Raas Mela in North-East India. At this time, ten incarnations of Vishnu were arranged in the 'Varandah' of Bhabani temple. The idols are taken out of the strong room of Madanmohan's house only this time in the whole year on this occasion of Raas yatra and decorated for fifteen days. These ancient idols are made of brass and all of these are heavy in weight. These idols are the incarnations of Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Narasingha, Baman, Parasurama, Rama, Krishna, Buddha and Kalki. Putna Rakshasi is another big attraction for children and they also crowd in front of small houses decorated with clay dolls for the Raas festival. There is a huge statue of Putna *Rakshasi* next to the stage. There little Krishna is sitting on her chest. Putna is about to die after being bitten by Krishna. The colour of this statue of Putna is bright red. The statue of Putna is made in the same trolley as the statue of the Bara Devi, the Bara Tara. Prabhat Chitrakar has been making this idol for generations.⁴

This time 'Ma Katyayani' is worshiped in that temple. Until this puja is not over, Raas cannot be commenced. After the completion of Katyayani puja, the puja of Raas starts. A huge stage is set up in front of the Bhabani temple. Right in front of it, special 'Hom' starts in two places next to the Jamuna Dighi. The chief priest usually worships and performs the 'Hom'. The king himself used to sit in the worship of this Raas. Hargauri Mishra said that he had met Maharaja Jagaddipendra Narayan three times in Ras Puja. In the absence of the king, the district governor of Cooch Behar has been sitting in this puja ever since. He has to keep fast on this day to sit in this puja. After wearing new clothes, the district magistrate sits in Ras Puja. This puja is performed with utmost devotion. When the puja is over, first the District Magistrate turns the Raas Chakra from left to right (clockwise). Only then the other devotees get the right to spin the rasa. This Raas puja adheres to the full-time schedule. So sometimes it takes long time till late night. From this time onwards Madan Mohan is worshiped on his throne in the *Varandah* for fifteen consecutive days.

On the first day of this Raas festival, people stay at Madan Mohan's Bari. The whole temple courtyard is beautifully decorated at this time. In the small tin houses of the temple, clay dolls are decorated with stories from Ramayana and Mahabharata. A huge Raas Mela lasted for fifteen days in Cooch Behar centring on this procession. 'Jatra', 'Pala gaan', and 'kirtan' are performed in these days. During these few days, there are several processions on the temple premises. Although the performance of 'Jatra' is seen to a certain extent in the village areas, but nowadays there is no such performances in the urban area. The only Madan Mohan Bari still holds this tradition with great pride. 'Kirtan' and 'Palagaan' groups are also brought here from different places.

The main attraction of the Raas festival at Madan Mohan Bari in Cooch Behar is the huge Raas Chakra. The insanity of millions of people is centred on touching the Raas Chakra. Every year during the Raas festival, this huge 'Raas Mancha' is built next to the Jamuna Dighi in front of the Bhabani temple. 'Raas Chakra' is made of 30 feet-long shawl wood. This huge shawl is dipped throughout the year in the Bairagi Dighi in front of the Madan Mohan Temple. The wood is picked up from the water 15 days before the Raas.⁸ 'Raas Mancha' is built around a willow tree. The wheel is octagonal. Vertically it looks like a geometric angle to some extent. First, it is made of the bamboo frame with white paper cut on it. Above of it there is a dome. Around the main shawl wood, the stage is made with six bamboos. There is also a cage in the shape of a rope. Later, these designed bamboo frames are hung one after the other. Finally, the Raas Chakra is ready for Madan Mohan Raas festival and the influence of three religions is clearly visible in this 'Raas Chakra'.⁴⁺⁷

Raas is a festival of Hinduism. According to Hindu mythology, Raas festival and Raas dance are performed in Vrindavan on the day of 'Raas Purnima'. There, all the gopinis used to dance around Krishna in a circle. This 'Raas Chakra' too seems to be carrying the same mythical trend. The rotation of the wheel here symbolizes the orbit of Krishna and his devotees. In addition to the image of Lord Krishna on the 'Raas Chakra', mythological narratives are narrated through images of various Hindu deities. This 'Raas Chakra' looks like the Buddhist 'Dharma Chakra'. This cycle is the larger version of Buddhist 'Kal Chakra' and it is also rotated from left to right (clockwise) like the Buddhist cycle.⁸ To find out the reason for the influence of Buddhism in Madan Mohan's house, it is necessary to know a little bit about the past. The fact is that Cooch Behar was in a good relationship with the states of Nepal, Bhutan, and Sikkim. This is a historical fact. That is why the influence of Buddhism has been felt here, even if only a little. This influence cannot be denied. Another major reason for this was the repeated attacks of the Bhutias in the state of Cooch Behar. In 1766, Maharaja Dairghyendra Narayan of Cooch Bihar went to the annual feast with the Bhutanese king at Chechapata and was captured by the Devaraja. After five years of captivity in Punakha, he was finally released in 1774 with the help of the English Company.⁴⁺⁸

For those five years, the state of Kochbihar was occupied by the Bhutias. Although Rajendranarayana (nephew) was selected as the king in the name only, the kingdom was administered by the instructions of Penshutomar, the representative of Bhutanese king Devaraja. Surprisingly, historians are also silent about these five years. As Kochbihar was under the Bhutias in these five years, it can be surmised that Buddhism had an impact on the religion and culture of the common people at that time. That is not unusual. However, the influence of Buddhism is not only found on the Raaschakra but also in different fields in Cooch Behar. On the left side of the sanctum of the Madan Mohan temple, one can perceive the throne of Mother Tara. There are statues of two dragons on either side of the throne which is commonly visible in Buddhist culture. Besides, the North Bengal Buddha Sanghashram, Buddha statue of Malbazar which was given to them by Maharaja Jagaddipendra Narayan Bhup Bahadur of Kochbihar, Kasar Ghanta inscribed with Tibbati script in Jalpesh Shiva temple, the moving Baneshwar idol touching the ground etc. are proofs of Buddhist influence. It is also known that in certain time, Buddhists and lamas from Bhutan used to come to worship at the Jalpesh Shiva Temple on special dates.³⁺⁴

The paper that can be seen in the Raas chakra looks exactly like the Taziya of the Muslims. The design of the latticework, which is placed across the entire 'Raas chakra', is reminiscent of Muslim and Mughal architecture and sculpture. A Muslim family from Chakir Bazar in Cooch Behar has been preparing this stage since that time. As far as the search is concerned, Pan Mohammad Mia prepared the first 'Raas chakra' obeying the wishes of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan. After his grandpa, and his father, Altaf Mia has been making this cycle for the last 36 years. Every year on the day of 'Lakshmi Purnima', the construction of this 'Raas chakra' starts with fasting. This is the month when all the members of the family are busy in making the 'Raas Chakra'. They clean the yard and preparation goes on there. He tries to have vegetarian foods that day. Altaf Mia said that the work of 'Raas Chakra' is done according to that particular design. The height of 'Raas Mancha' is 18 feet. Above it is a four feet dome. In fact, it is a five-step copper pitcher. Above the head of the wheel is a red canopy with four thin bamboo stalks. As such a long bamboo frame is prone to breakage, the whole thing is divided into two parts to avoid any catastrophe. This wheel is hung from 7 feet 5 inches above the ground. In that case, the height of the wheel is 29 feet. The raw materials such as bamboo, jute, paper, glue, paint, and pictures are all provided by the Devatra Trust Board. Earlier, the Maharaja himself inaugurated the function, but now the duty is on the district magistrate of Cooch Behar.⁴⁺⁸ At the end of the puja, he starts the Raas festival by turning the Raas Chakra. Then everyone become desperate to touch 'Raas Chakra'. Their lineage will remain intact in making Raas chakra. In this way, the century-old Raas Chakra of Cooch Behar continues to bear the mark of a wonderful communal harmony. It is far beyond the reach of caste. This Raas *mancha* bears witness of the liberal attitude of the Maharajas of the then Cooch Behar kingdom towards religion. Even today, this cycle is a symbol of religious tolerance and religious unity in Cooch Behar.

Conclusion- From that time till today, worship has been going on maintaining the appropriate time in the traditional Madan Mohan house of Cooch Behar following the tradition and customs. Till date, time and conventional practices have not been changed. Madan Mohan is like the son of the people of Cooch Behar. That is why the people of Cooch Behar do not call Madan Mohan's place of residence as a temple but Madan *Bari*. The role of Cooch Behar Raas mela is very important in the context of different variety, antiquity, mythological and modern puppet shows, stage art, festivities, cultural exchange, buying and selling of goods, etc. People from Hindu community visit this two-hundred years old fair and the people

from Muslim, Buddhist religion also come to enjoy the grandeur of this fair. This festival of Cooch Behar is the excellent example of communal harmony.

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