

Devotion and Identity: Tracing Cultural Transformation of Vaishnavism in Bhagwanpur

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Abstract: *Vaishnavism, a major Hindu sect, focuses on worshipping Vishnu and his incarnations, particularly Krishna and Rama. Vaishnavism significantly influenced various regions in ancient India through its theological and devotional practices. In Bhagwanpur, the arrival and development of Vaishnavism have fostered unique religious and cultural expressions, integrating with local traditions and art forms. This study examines the historical journey of Vaishnavism in Bhagwanpur, highlighting its integration into local rituals, festivals, and artistic expressions. By analysing historical records and cultural practices, the article elucidates how Vaishnavism has been shaped by the cultural milieu of Bhagwanpur, offering a detailed perspective on the dynamic interplay between religion and regional culture.*

Key Words: *Vaishnavism, Culture, Temple, Namasankirtana, Bhagwanpur.*

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Bhagwanpur, nestled in the secluded expanse of East Midnapore district along the southwestern frontier of West Bengal, boasts a storied past. The year 1986 marked a significant transformation when the Bhagwanpur police station was bifurcated, giving rise to the Bhupatinagar police station, encompassing the southern segment of Bhagwanpur Block-2 within Bhupatinagar village.¹ Presently, the Bhagwanpur area is strategically positioned at the northern edge of the erstwhile Contai Sub-Division, bordering Orissa to the south, with the Keleghai River delineating a natural boundary to the north. The Maina police station flanks this enchanting locale, the Chandipur thānā (formerly Nandigram), Khejuri thānā, Patashpur, and Sabong thānā to the west.² Simultaneously, the Paharpur–Kalinagar canal, known as Bāgdinadi, graces its southern perimeter. The terrain of this area gently descends from the north towards the south and southeast, adorned with significant waterways such as the Keleghai River, Paninala–Itaberia–Baroj Canal, Udbadal Canal, Gopinathpur–Kalaberia–Ektarpur Canal, Puntimari Canal, Argowal–Paushi Canal, and the Bāgdī River.³ This region is geographically adjacent to Orissa and shares profound linguistic and cultural connections with its neighbour. The cultural imprint of Orissa, particularly in the veneration of Krishna and Vishnu through the lens of Jagannath worship, resonates throughout the local community, influencing dialects and spiritual practices. Historically, Bhagwanpur was once part of Orissa under the reign of the Gajapati and Ganga dynasties, and it has adeptly maintained its distinctive identity through a harmonious blend of folk traditions and architectural influences from both India and West Bengal.⁴ The ancient temples and sacred sites dotting the landscape are enduring symbols of its rich architectural legacy, philosophical depth, historical significance, and vibrant traditions. To fully appreciate Bhagwanpur, one must first grasp the essence of its origins and ancient heritage, as referenced in the Mahabharata, which speaks of three kingdoms in south-eastern India: Tamralipta, Subrahma, and Kalinga, once ruled by Karna. Historical records indicate that in the 9th century (822 CE), Tamluk, Balisita, Turka, Sujāmuṭhā, and Kutubpur were part of the East Midnapore district, each ruled by five Mahishya kings. With the decline of the Senā kings in the early 13th century, the Utkala rule gained prominence in the entire Midinipur region of South Bengal under the leadership of the Kalinga king Anaṅgabhīmādevā.⁵ Conversely, Ralph Fitch mentioned in his travelogue the united Midnapore under the independent Hijli kingdom. In 1546, Rahmat Khan established the independent Hijli kingdom with the title of Ikhtiyar Khan, following the advice of Utkalraj Prataparudra's minister Gobind Vidyadhar. Unfortunately, this kingdom met its demise with the passing of Isha Khan in 1584. By 1611 AD, the entire Midnapore region came under the rule of the Mughal emperor Jahangir.⁶ After Hijli's Pathan dynasty, the eastern Midnipur region was divided into two main zamindaris.⁷ Krishna Panda leads *Jālāmuṭhā*, while Ishwari Pattnāyekār leads *Mājnāmuṭhā*. This time our main discussion is the area of *Mājnāmuṭhā* or greater Bhagwanpur.⁸

I

The Bhagwanpur region is an essential part of West Bengal, rather than a distinct town. Its artistic heritage, spiritual practices, rituals, and folk traditions are intricately intertwined with the local geography, climate, social dynamics, and cultural legacy. The indigenous inhabitants

of this area transformed the dense forests into fertile agricultural landscapes. The necessity of cattle rearing arose to support their farming activities, while the abundant rivers and creeks offered a rich source of fish for sustenance. In those times, most of the populace was engaged in agriculture and fishing, likely tracing their lineage back to ancient settlements such as Tamralipta and Dantan in the Northwest.⁹ Thus, it is only natural that this area shares similarities with those regions regarding spiritual beliefs and the veneration of deities. Delving into this locale's foundational aspects of religion and culture presents a formidable challenge. The interplay among diverse communities, the impact of spiritual leaders, and the patronage of royalty have all played pivotal roles in shaping the evolution of religion and culture over the centuries. This region's richness in diversity is particularly pronounced in Midnapore, a phenomenon attributed to its distinctive geographical characteristics. The western part of this district acts as a natural bridge connecting northern and southern India. As a result, Midnapore, along with the expansive territory of Greater Bengal, witnessed the emergence of a tribal community in prehistoric times, formed from the union of the Proto-Australoid peoples from the North and the Dravidian-speaking groups from the South, collectively known as the Adivasis of Bengal. Those of Austric descent who resisted the blending of cultures during that period are the ancestors of the modern Santal-Munda.¹⁰ This ancient 'Koum' community of Midnapore laid the foundations of a prehistoric civilization, with evidence of their existence found in the Neolithic tools and Copper Age artifacts unearthed in Tamluk, Egra, and Jhargram. The Brahminical culture saw a remarkable expansion in Greater Bengal during the Gupta period of the 5th century. However, before this golden age, the Aryans had already begun their engagement with Jainism around the 3rd century BC and Buddhism in the 1st century CE. Despite the establishment of Muslim dominion in Bengal during the twelfth century, Midnapore, together with Orissa, remained under Hindu sovereignty until the triumph of Orissa King Hari Chandan Mukundadev by Kalapahar, the valiant commander of Pathan Sultan Suleiman Karrani. In the lush and vibrant land of Koum society, a harmonious culture flourished despite occasional conflicts, deserving of utmost respect. In the 7th century, Shaivite worship gained prominence in Gaud under the rule of King Shashanka. Shashanka's kingdom once extended up to the Subarnarekha River in West Midnapore. But during the reign of the senā kings in Bengal in the twelfth century, the passion for Vishnu worship can be seen in the forms of quadrangular *Narayana murti* (idol) and the *Shalagrāmā* rock in the regions of South Bengal. During this era, in response to the prevalence of mythological gods and Brahminism, the worship of the folk goddess, particularly *Shakti*, began to emerge. The overall depiction of the socio-religious life in Bengal was somewhat distinct.¹¹ A poet from the sixteenth century, Brindaban Das, expresses this.

*"Dharma karma lake sabe ei matra Jane
mangal chandir git kare jagarane
dambha kari vishahari puje kun jan
puttali karaye keha diya bahu dhan
dhana nasta kare putrakanyar bivaya
vasali pujaye keha nana upachare
madya managsa diya keha yaksha puje kare."*¹²

(Translation: People are familiar with different social events and religious ceremonies, such as staying awake at night to listen to the songs of Mangal Chandi, a folk goddess. They take pride in worshipping *Vishahari*, the snake goddess Manasa, by creating elaborate earthen images of deities, often at great expense. Significant amounts of money are also spent on the weddings of sons and daughters. Additionally, the folk goddess *Bashuli* is honoured with various sacrificial offerings, while *Yaksha* worship involves the presentation of wine and meat). Conversely, there exists a palpable indifference towards the adoration of Lord Krishna. The Brahmins, along with the societal elite and the general populace, have often cast disparaging remarks upon the Vaishnavas—though they are a small faction—regarding their practices, particularly the *Hari Sankirtana*, deeming them as irreligious, illogical, and contrary to the established religious customs of the Bengali Hindu community of that era. In Bhagwanpur, alongside the veneration of traditional Brahmanical deities, numerous folk deities such as *Chandi*, *Manasa*, *Dharma Thakur*, *Shashti*, *Sitala*, *Kalu Rai*, and *Pañchu Thakur* were commonly worshipped during the medieval era. Various festivals were celebrated in honour of different deities, including Siva (*Shivratri* and *Gajan*), Lord Jagannatha (*Rāthāyatra*), Lord Krishna (*Janmashtami*, *Rāthāyatra*, and *Dol Utsav*), as well as Durga and Kali.¹³

The Gaudiya Vaishnava movement or neo-Vaisnavism, founded by *Mahaprabhu* (1486-1533), flourished in Bhagwanpur during the 16th and 17th centuries, guided by Shyamananda Prabhu and Rasikananda Goswami. In this context, it is essential to highlight that Sri Chaitanya rejected the elevated status of the Brahmins due to their insufficient understanding and devotion on one hand, and their engagement in immoral behaviours on the other, as evidenced in the works of Vrindavan Das:

“*Chandal chandal nahe jadi krishna bale,
bipra nahe bipra jadi asatpathe chale.*”¹⁴

(A chandal (a low caste) who worships Krishna will no longer be regarded as a low caste. Conversely, a Brahmin (from the priestly class) will lose his status if he engages in various vices). During the time of *Mahaprabhu Chaitanya Deva* Puri’s visit on the Haldi-Keleghai river route (1510), he came to *Prayāg-ghātā* or *Pāharghātā* in Patashpur and later at Chandipur during his return to Nabadwip (1514). *Goswami* Vasudeva Ghosh established the Mahaprabhu temple and Math in Tamluk.¹⁵ This period ignited a fervent devotion to Krishna in the Bhagwanpur region, where the divine took precedence over the traditional quadrupedal Vishnu, manifesting in various forms such as *Narugopal*, *Shyamchand*, and *Madan Mohan*. The veneration of a diverse array of Vaishnava deities clearly illustrates the significant appeal of Vaishnavism. These deities are revered under various appellations, including *Vishnu*, *Balagopal*, *Benugopal*, *Madanmohan*, *Radhakrishna*, *Sri Ram Chandra*, *Chaitanya Deva*, and *Nityananda*. The worship of Harinam and Krishna became accessible to all, transcending caste boundaries, as both men and women embraced this spiritual practice. The establishment of *Hari Mancha* and the vibrant *Nama Sankirtan* mandaps, where devotees gathered for hours of collective chanting, further enriched this devotional landscape. The divine pair of Gaur–Nitai was venerated alongside Radhakrishna, creating a harmonious blend of worship. After the death of the Kalinga ruler Prataparudradeva

(1540), unrest occurred in Kalinga state, and due to anarchy, ministers, priests, amateurs, and fortune seekers came to Bhagwanpur and started living. Later, the Vaishnava movement spread when *Nanda*, *Tripathi*, and *Sharangi* title seekers began living in these regions from Orissa at the invitation of Zamindar Yadavaram.

The incursion of Muslim forces into Bengal at the onset of the 13th century significantly impeded the development of Hindu architecture—numerous Hindu and Buddhist temples, as well as monasteries, faced destruction during this period. The Bhakti movement reached its zenith through the teachings of Chaitanya, who advocated for neo-Vaishnavism. Gradually, a new era emerged, characterized by the people's devotion, which was manifested in the construction of temples. The majority of these edifices were established between the 16th and 19th centuries. In the aftermath of Chaitanya's influence, two prominent Vaishnava acharyas, Sri Shyamananda and Sri Rasikananda, founded numerous monasteries and temples across the expansive regions of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa, aiming to propagate the principles of Vaishnavism. Vaishnavism has significantly influenced the artistic, architectural, and sculptural landscape of Bhagwanpur. The establishment of these temples can be attributed to local landlords, Zamindars, and members of royal families.¹⁶ Additionally, affluent merchants and individuals from various castes contributed to constructing the Maths and temples in the region. Numerous temples were erected to foster religiosity and divine merit. A notable trend emerged among the Mahishya and other lower caste groups, who, influenced by the neo-Vaishnavism advocated by Sri Chaitanya, began establishing Vaishnava temples. Furthermore, it is evident that upper-class individuals, including Brahmins and Kayasthas, also played a significant role in the initiative to construct Vaishnav temples. After analysing the temple culture of Bhagwanpur town in the context of West Bengal, we will see that the temples of this region are divided into four categories: *Chāla*, *Ratṇa*, *Deul*, *Chāndnī*, and *Dālān*. Each archaeological site of the township has a specific folk belief and culture associated with it. Tribal communities predominantly populate Bhagwanpur, and for several centuries, this region was governed by the Orissa monarchy. Consequently, the Orissa culture has significantly influenced the local populace, leading them to adopt architectural styles characteristic of Orissa traditions. As a result, several temples have been erected using the Orissa or Kalinga *Rekha Deul* and *Vadra* architectural designs. Additionally, there are instances where various artistic patterns are blended. The influence of neo-Vaishnavism is prominently manifested in the construction of structures such as *Harimanचा*, *Dolmanचा*, and *Rāsāmanचा*, which can be found throughout the region. Some notable Vaishnava temples in the Bhagwanpur region include the Madan Gopal Jiu Temple of Arjunagar, established by Jadabram Ray. This temple was built in the Kalinga architectural style, and a Tulsimanचा was situated at the top of the temple. Another significant temple is the Navaratna temple at Jukhiya, constructed in the *Chāndnī* style by Hridoyaram Bera. The walls of this temple are adorned with Vaishnava depictions such as the battle between Rama and Ravana, the abduction of Sita, Hanuman in the Ashokavan, and various Krishna Leela scenes. Other prominent ancient Vaishnava temples in the region include the Madan Mohan Temple at Basudevberia, built in the Chandni style, where Narayan

is worshipped in the form of a *Shalagram Shila*; the Radha Madhav Temple at Radhapur, where Narayan is worshipped in the forms of Jagannath, Balaram, and Subhadra; and the *ek-ratna* Temple of Shri Kishore Jiu at Bibhisapur, where Narayan is also worshipped in the form of a *Shalagram Shila*.

There exists a profound connection between art and the practices of *sādhana*-bhajan. An aesthetically pleasing and richly adorned temple can evoke a sense of devotion among its observers, particularly among the devotees. Consequently, individuals have depicted or sculpted representations of deities, mythological narratives, and notably, the life and pastimes of Chaitanya on the temple walls. These artistic expressions are crucial for understanding the folk attitudes and preferences of the community. The intricate metal and wooden sculptures of Radha Krishna and Chaitanya and the detailed carvings on the temple windows and doors provide substantial evidence of the region's artistic excellence. Brahmins or Vaishnavas perform the ceremonial duties within these temples. Daily, the priests engage in worship and prayer with profound devotion and sincerity, including offerings of light food (*Ballyabhog*), meal offerings accompanied by lighting candles (*Bhogarati*), placing deities on beds, and awakening them each morning. On special occasions such as *Janmashtami* (the birthday of Krishna), *Radhashtami* (the birthday of Sri Radha), *Dolyatra*, *Rāthāyatra*, and the birth and death anniversaries of the founding Mahotsavas, grand festivals are celebrated with great splendour. It is important to note that *Harinam Sankirtana* and *Mahotsav* are essential components of these festivities.¹⁷

II

The discussion has now shifted to the rituals and festivals observed by the Vaishnavas in Bhagwanpur. Rituals can be defined as the prescribed methods of conducting divine services. The most extensive compilation of Vaishnava rituals is in *Haribhaktivilasa*, authored by Gopal Bhatta, one of the *Sada Gosvamins* from Vrindavana.¹⁸ This text emphasizes *Baidhibhakti*, or ritualistic devotion, to render Vaishnava practices acceptable to the upper castes in various regions of India. However, the *Haribhaktivilasa* was not particularly beneficial for the Vaishnavas in Bengal, as it lacked provisions for the worship of Chaitanya. With the advent of Mahaprabhu worship, the concept of *Panchattvas* emerged as a central tenet of Vaishnavism in Bengal, represented by the five principles of Chaitanya, Nityananda, Advaita, Sri Vasa, and Gadadhar Pandita. All authentic Vaishnavas in Bengal, including the *Sahajiyas* and *Bauls*, began to revere Chaitanya as the singular incarnation of Krishna and Radha. Nevertheless, the worship of Chaitanya did not come with standardized rituals. A Vaishnava saint named Krishnadas sought to facilitate the adherence to *Raganuga* rituals among the Vaishnavas. Following his guidance, his disciple Krishnadas II authored four significant texts: *Bhayanasarasamgraha*, *Guitaka*, *Gaurangovinadarcanasmaranapaddhati*, and *Sāadhanāmritacandrika*. The *Gaurangovinadarcanasmaranapaddhati* outlines the rituals associated with Krishna worship, while *Sāadhanāmritacandrika* seeks to create a synthesis between the worship of Krishna and that of Chaitanya in terms of ritual practices.¹⁹

Syamanandi Vaishnavism, cantered in Gopiballabpur, is notable in Bhagwanpur and differs from Gaudiya Vaishnavism in terms of administration and rituals to a certain degree. The *sāadhanā-bhajan* systems were originally prevalent within the tradition. Following the Chaitanya period, the Manjari form of worship, characterized by the sentiment of *Sakhi-bhava* towards Krishna, gained significant traction among Vaishnava leaders. The initial proponents of this Manjari worship were the first three missionaries of the faith: Srinivas, Narottam, and Syamananda. The *sāadhanā padḍhati* associated with Srinivas and Narottam is called *Sri Manjari* and *Champak Manjari*, respectively, while Syamananda's practice is known as *Kanak Manjari*. Syamananda approached the Lord as one of Radharani's eight *Sakhis*, or female companions, and his followers embody the *Lalita Sakhi Bhava*.²⁰ The notion of loving Krishna with the fervour of feminine devotion is a recurring theme within neo-Vaishnavism. The Syamanandi sect of Bhagwanpur exhibits subtle differences in rituals compared to other sects such as *Madhbacharya*, *Nityanandi*, *Ballavacharya*, and *Ramanandi*. One notable distinction lies in the tilak marks associated with each sect, which vary significantly. The Syamanandi Vaishnavas adhere to caste divisions and observe the practice of wearing the sacred thread following the *upanayana* ceremony. Furthermore, marriages within this community are typically conducted among individuals of the same caste. The principal rituals adhered to by Vaishnavas exhibit considerable variation among individuals. However, the comprehensive list of practices outlined in the *Sadhanamritacandrika* presents a formidable challenge for the average Vaishnava, with only a select few able to fulfil these expectations. Typically, those Vaishnavas who reside in temples engage in fundamental rituals, which include prostrating before deities, performing *japa*, reciting sacred texts, gathering flowers, cleaning the temple premises, bathing, applying tilak, worshipping deities, and participating in *kirtana* through singing and listening. Dietary practices also vary, with some individuals adhering to vegetarianism while a larger segment consumes fish; however, no genuine Vaishnava partakes in meat. Participation in festivals and *Mahotsavas* is a common practice among them. Additionally, many Vaishnavas and Vaishnavis are often seen counting beads from a rosary that they wear around their necks. Given the demanding nature of contemporary life, numerous Vaishnavas must reduce their daily rituals to accommodate other professional responsibilities.

In India, festivals exhibit a remarkable diversity in their origins and are abundant in number. Hindu festivals, in particular, are predominantly rooted in religious traditions and largely maintain their customary characteristics. However, these celebrations also serve social and psychological purposes. They allow individuals to experience fulfilment in an environment that contrasts with the monotony of daily life. Additionally, festivals foster a sense of community among participants. Recognizing the significance of festivals within society, this section aims to illustrate the Vaishnava festivals and the fairs celebrated in Bengal, explicitly focusing on Bhagwanpur. In Bhagwanpur, the festival of *Chandan Yatra* takes place on *Akshay Tritiya*, which falls on the third thithi of the waxing phase of the moon in the month of Vaisakh. During this celebration, the idols of Radha and Krishna are adorned with sandalwood paste and placed in boats on a river or large tank. Following this, the boats are rowed for some time. This tradition has been observed at the Jukhiya Navaratna Temple and the Bhupatinagar. hithala Temple, where a fair (*Chandani Mela*) is also organized with the festivities.

The *Rāthāyatra*, festival dedicated to Lord Jagannath (Krishna), along with his siblings Balarama and Subhadra, is referenced in the Bengali literature produced by Vaishnava poets during the 15th and 16th centuries A.D.²¹ This sacred event occurs in the month of *Āṣāḍha* (July), during which the deities of Jagannath, Balarama, and Subhadra are removed from their shrine and placed upon an elevated platform for public viewing, where a priest ceremonially bathes them in a ritual known as *Snanayatra*. Following this, the idols are carefully positioned on a *ratha*, or festival chariot. Devotees enthusiastically pull the ropes of the *ratha*, expressing their joy and devotion. The vibrant crowds then transport the *ratha* to another temple called *Masir Bari*. After a week, the *ratha* is returned to its original temple, completing the *Rāthāyatra* ceremony. Lord Jagannath has emerged as a prominent deity, receiving veneration across various regions of Bhagwanpur. Given its status as a frontier area adjacent to Orissa, the influence of Lord Jagannath is particularly significant among the local populace. Numerous temples dedicated to Jagannath have been established throughout this block. Within these sacred spaces, the deities Jagannath, Balaram, and Subhadra are honoured daily. Devotees offer the deities boiled rice and vegetarian curries with meticulous care and profound devotion. The idols are periodically brought outside for public viewing. Additionally, grand *Rāthāyatra* festivals are typically organized within the temple grounds. We will now examine some of the notable *Rāthāyatra* celebrations in this area. The *Rāthāyatra* celebrated in Bar Bhagbanpur is often called the Rath of Dwarimara.²² It is important to note that Dwarimara does not denote a vast area; rather, it is a small village in Nunhand Mauja (J.L.No. 117) of Bhagbanpur. While the *Rāthāyatra* traverses through Dwarimara, the principal shrine dedicated to Jagannath Dev is in Bar Bhagwanpur Mauza (J.L.No. 107). The establishment of Sri Sri Jagannath Ashram in this locale is attributed to Puri Goswami Maharaj. The deity was installed in a mud temple in 1970 C.E., marking the commencement of the *Rāthāyatra*. Subsequently, a 40-foot-high paved temple was constructed in 2005 C.E. The temple houses several idols, including *Jagannath Jiu*, *Sri Radha Govinda*, *Sri Gauranga*, *Vijaya Vighraha*, *Nil Madhav Jiu*, and *Giriraj Jiu*. The management of the temple falls under the Gopinath Gaudiya Math of Mayapur. During the festivities, Jagannath Dev is ceremoniously returned to the temple from Bar Bhagbanpur after performing a circumambulation of the Bhimeshwari Bazar in a chariot that stands approximately 15 feet tall. Additionally, fairs are organized on both the days of *Rāthāyatra* and *Punya Yatra*. The *Āṣāḍha Rāthāyatra* of Jagannath commenced in Bhagwanpur around 1975, initiated by the merchants of Shibbazar who established the Jagannath Balaram Subhadra Vighraha (Idol), thereby popularizing this festival. Five years later, Vaishnav devotee Dhirendranath Metia assumed the responsibility for the deity's worship. To this day, Brahmins continue to perform regular worship in that household. Currently, a new temple is being constructed on the site of the old, deteriorating temple dedicated to the deity. The *Daru rath* stands approximately 25 feet tall and features nine pinnacles, each adorned with figures of horses and charioteers. The renowned artist Surendranath Barai, a skilled carpenter, crafted the chariot. Both the *Rāthāyatra* and the *Punya Yatra* fairs converge in Shibbazar. Presently, the *Rāthāyatra* proceeds from the eastern end of the bazaar to the Zamindar house. Numerous devotees also travel

from their families to engage in worship. The village of Charabar, located in Bhagwanpur (J.L. No. 144) along the Egra-Bajkul road, has a *Rāthāyatra* tradition that spans at least fifty years. The deity Jagannath Dev is enshrined in the *Chandni Temple*, which is situated next to the residence of devotee Manoranjan Das. Brahmins conduct daily rituals. The *Rāthāyatra* was initiated during the tenure of the temple's founder, Jitendranath Das. Historically, the chariot featured 13 crests, although it currently displays nine peaks. With the active participation of residents, a fair is organized on the days of *Rāthāyatra* and *Punya Yatra*. After an extensive procession, the chariot halts at the village's *Chandimandap*, standing approximately 20 feet tall. The Asadhi Rath Yatra in Goalpukur commenced in the year 1966 CE. The festival is initiated with a chariot procession from Mohammadpur village (J.L. No. 7) near the Keleghai River. Subsequently, the chariot procession expanded to various villages, culminating in the arrival of all chariots at the Goalpukur market. Notable chariots from Charialpur and Mobarakpur are included in this celebration, with the support of Ram Pratap Singh from Babia village. Currently, eight chariots are actively participating in the chariot fair. For nearly 35 years, the *Rāthāyatra* has been celebrated in Shukrullapur, within the Kotabar Gram Panchayat. The installation of the Jagannath Vighraha coincides with the village's Brahmin family, featuring wooden idols of Jagannath, Balaram, and Subhadra, all crafted from *Daru* (*Monoon longifolium*) wood. The chariot is also constructed from *Daru* wood, and arrangements are made to dismantle it following the festival. The *Rāthāyatra* in Arjunnagar has its origins in the late 20th century. For an extended period, the families associated with Tanyabila in Patashpur conducted the *Rāthāyatra* featuring their idol of Jagannath Dev in that region. However, this tradition was halted due to financial difficulties. In response to this situation, the devotees from *Giri Para* in Arjunnagar took the initiative to organize a fair by relocating the idol to their community. The chariot, constructed from *Daru* wood, stands at 20 feet. A distinctive aspect of this fair is that it continues until the *Punya Yatra*. The Das family from Radhapur has a long-standing tradition of worshiping Jagannath Jiu, yet the *Rāthāyatra* in the area commenced only 60 years ago, in 1960 AD. This event was initiated on *Maghi Purnima* through the collaborative efforts of Nikhilranjan and Barendranath from the devotee Das family, along with residents such as Jatindranath Patra, Ishwar Chandra Patra, Dhirendranath Maiti, Bhanu Maity, and Vinay Kumar Hazra. Currently, approximately 70 to 75 families actively participate in this festival.²³

The *Rāthāyatra* of Angarberia (J.L. 265) traces its origins to approximately 1975 AD when Surendranath Das established the Jagannath Vighraha within a mud temple and initiated the practice of *Seva-Puja* (daily worship). Subsequently, his son, Haripad Das, constructed the *Chandni* temple. Vaishnava Nanigopal Maity oversaw the service and worship. The *Rāthāyatra* festival commenced two to three years following the deity's establishment. Surendranath was supported in this endeavour by Gourhari Santara, Tapan Shasmal, and other dedicated individuals. Eventually, the village's '*Jagannath Seva Samiti*' took the lead in organizing the *Rāthāyatra*. The craftsman responsible for creating the one-peaked *Darurath*, which stands approximately ten feet tall, was Krishna Gopal Maity. In Bamunia, a devoted individual named Ganesh Chandra Das initiated the *Rāthāyatra* around 1990 by establishing the *Jagannath*

Vigraha (Idol). Brahmins conduct daily worship of the deity. The area transforms into a vibrant fair during the *Rāthāyatra* and *Punya Yatra*. Initially, the chariot was made of Darurath, but it was replaced with an iron structure, standing about ten feet tall. The oldest *Rāthāyatra* within the Bhagbanpur Thana is the Maghi Purnima *Rāthāyatra* of Radha Gobind Jeu, held at Jukhia. The Navaratna Temple, dedicated to Radha Gobind Jeu in Dheluya, was established by Hridoyaram Bera in the early 18th century. On *Akshay Tritiya*, the *Vigraha* would traditionally journey to the *Chandani yatra* at *Chandan Dighi*. The chariot procession of the deity also occurred at the temple in Jukhiya Bazar during Maghi Purnima.²⁴

The *Jhulan* festival commences on the eleventh day of the waxing phase of *Śrāvaṇa* (August).²⁵ It spans five days, culminating on the day of *Rakhi Purnima* in numerous Radha-Krishna temples within the region. A large cradle is positioned in a bower or among the trees adjacent to the temple, where the idols of Radha and Krishna are placed. Subsequently, priests and devotees engage in worship while gently swinging the cradle, accompanied by devotional songs and *Harinam Sankirtana*, enhanced by the sounds of traditional instruments such as *Khol*, cymbals, the *Singa*, and the flute. Many temples host a *Mahotsav* in celebration of this event. In Bhagwanpur, the *Jhulan* festival is observed at the Kajlagaḍ Gopal Jeu temple, the Jukhiya *Navaratna* temple, and the Shyamsundar temple located in Paikbheri.

Janmashtami commemorates the birth of Lord Krishna, regarded as the eighth avatar of Lord Vishnu, and is celebrated during the months of *Śrāvaṇa* or *Bhādra* (July to September).²⁶ On this occasion, various temples host *Harinam Sankirtana*, a devotional singing of the holy names. Devotees visit these temples, bringing offerings for Lord Krishna, which they present with deep and genuine devotion. Additionally, many families observe this festival by organizing worship of Lord Hari at the *Harimancha*, often enlisting the services of a professional priest. In some instances, they also arrange for *Harinam Sankirtana* to take place.²⁷ The festival of *Janmashtami* is commemorated with great enthusiasm at the Shyamsundar Temple in Paikbheri.

The *Rāsāyatra* is arguably the most significant festival within the Vaishnava tradition, particularly in its profound spiritual implications. This celebration typically occurs on the full moon of *Kārttika*, which falls between October and November. The festival is rooted in the sacred love between Radha and Krishna. Initially, a grand altar is constructed, adorned with a large *Kadamba* (Bur flower) tree that serves as a canopy. The central focus of this altar features the idols of Krishna and Radha, depicted in their divine union. Surrounding these central figures are numerous pairs of *Gopis* and Krishnas, all embodying a spirit of joy and playfulness, with the Krishnas depicted as merrily playing the flute. Radha and the *Gopis* are similarly portrayed in exuberant dance. The visual representation of the altar and its images encapsulates a profound spiritual and symbolic truth regarding the essence of the universe. In this context, Krishna represents '*Purusha*' while Radha symbolizes '*Prakriti*'; their union signifies the creation of the '*Brahmanda*' or universe. The *Gopis* epitomizes selfless devotion, achieving spiritual bliss and celestial joy by renouncing their earthly desires and transcending their physical existence. Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu is believed to have fully grasped the philosophical depth of *Ras Lila*, which conveys that the Human Soul is an inseparable fragment of the Supreme Soul. The

Supreme Soul beckons the Human Soul to unite with it, symbolized by Krishna's flute, which invites devotees to connect with Him. Over time, numerous Vaishnava devotees and poets have composed various lyrical works celebrating *Ras Lila*. In the Bhagwanpur *Rāsāyatra*, this festival is observed at the Kajlagarh Gopal Jeu Temple, Jukhiya Navaratna Temple, Shyamsundar Temple of Paikbheri, and other newly established temples throughout the region.

Dolyatra, often called the swinging festival, is dedicated to Vishnu and occurs on the full moon day of *Phālguna* (February-March) in conjunction with the Holi festivities. On this occasion, the *Shalagram Shila* is transported from the temple to a newly erected nearby altar. It is subsequently venerated through a fire oblation, and its wooden throne is swung three times in a north-south direction. Following this ritual, the idol is adorned with red powder, which attendees then apply to their foreheads as a divine blessing from the Lord. The day preceding *Dolyatra* features a local fire festival known as '*Chanchar*', celebrated with great enthusiasm by individuals of all ages. For this festival, a structure resembling a shrine is constructed using straw, bamboo, palm leaves, and green Bakul leaves, typically situated near a tank or in an open area adjacent to a temple. A sheep crafted from rice dough, referred to as Holika (sister of Hiranyakashipu), is placed within this structure. According to tradition, Vishnu vanquished Holika by incinerating him. To commemorate this narrative, participants joyfully ignite the '*chanchar*' in the evening, symbolizing the triumph of good over evil and paving the way for positivity. Determining the precise inception date of the Dol festival in Bengal presents a challenge.²⁸ However, it is noted that Sri Chaitanya Deva was born on *Phālguna Purnima* in 1486, a significant event that catalysed the festival's development, as evidenced by medieval Bengali literature. Presently, *Dolyatra*, unlike numerous other Vaishnava festivals, holds considerable allure for the general populace. On this day, worship is conducted in every Radha-Krishna temple, where the deities are adorned with *avir* (red powder), accompanied by *Sankirtana*. This occasion also features fairs organized on various temple grounds, which persist for several days and are filled with joy and enthusiasm. Although the Dol festival and its associated fairs are primarily related to the Vaishnava community, they attract a diverse audience from all sects and communities, transcending caste, religion, and Varna distinctions. Individuals, including women and children, gather in large numbers at these fairs, participating collectively in the spirit of devotion. We can include numerous personal, individual, or family celebrations, as well as community or village festivals such as *Mahotsav* and *namasankirtana*, that take place throughout this area. This article explores the historical development of Vaishnavism and the associated Vaishnavas culture in Bhagwanpur. By examining the geopolitical and socioreligious cultural context relevant to this study, we have investigated how the evolution of Neo-Vaishnavism and its influence shape the cultural landscape of Bhagwanpur.

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