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Cultural Assimilation of Ancient Jainism across the River Valleys of Bankura District

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ABSTRACT

The document offers a brief account of the historical, cultural, and religious influence of Jainism in the Bankura district of West Bengal. It emphasizes how Jainism shaped the region and was eventually assimilated into Hinduism, leaving behind a rich legacy of archaeological, historical, and cultural significance.

Keywords: Jainism in Bankura, Assimilation, Hinduism, Cultural Significance.

FULL PAPER

Introduction

The history of Jainism in the Bankura district offers an intriguing lens into the spread, flourishing, and eventual decline of this ancient religion in Eastern India. The region's archaeological remains, cultural assimilation, and religious transformations illustrate the significant role Jainism played in shaping the cultural identity of Bankura over centuries.

The Historical Context

The earliest mention of the area now known as Bankura appears in the Jaina Acharanga Sutra, dating to the 6th or 5th century BCE. This text narrates the travels of Mahavira, the 24th Tirthankara, through the rugged terrains of Subbabhumi and Vajjabhumi in Ladha (modern-day Rarh or Radha). During this period, the region was heavily forested, its inhabitant's hostile, and its villages isolated. Despite these challenges, Mahavira's presence marked the beginning of Jain influence in the area. Scholars such as Probodh Chandra Bagchi have noted that Jainism became well-established in Bengal by the 3rd century BCE, and Hiuen Tsang's accounts from the 7th century CE highlight its prominence in the region.

Spread of Jainism Along River Valleys

The river systems of Bankura, including the Damodar, Dwarkeswar, Shilavati, and Kangsavati, played a critical role in spreading Jainism. The Pareshnath hills, located in present-day Giridih district, were central to Jainism in Eastern India. Jains believe that 20 of the 24 Tirthankaras attained enlightenment there. From this epicentre, Jainism moved into Bankura, with the rivers serving as conduits for cultural and religious exchange. Archaeologist J.D. Beglar identified ancient routes that facilitated this expansion. The Dwarkeswar River, in particular, is closely associated with Jain antiquities, indicating its importance as a cultural and religious artery.

Archaeological Evidence

The archaeological evidence of Jainism in Bankura is both extensive and fascinating, providing insights into the region's historical and cultural development. Several villages, including Dihar, Bhuyhara, Sonatapal, and Deulbhira, are home to remnants of Jain temples and monasteries dating back to the 9th to 12th centuries CE. These structures often stand along the banks

of the Dwarkeswar River, which played a significant role in connecting the region to broader Jain religious networks.

One of the most striking aspects of Jain archaeological remains in Bankura is the collection of stone idols. These idols, primarily representing the Tirthankaras, are made of laterite stone, which had to be transported from distant areas, reflecting the considerable resources and dedication of the local Jain community. The craftsmanship of these idols demonstrates the involvement of skilled artisans and the influence of Jain patrons who invested heavily in religious and cultural projects. The prevalence of Parsvanatha's idol, often depicted with a seven-serpent canopy, is a recurring feature in these relics.

Key sites such as Radhanagar, Jaipur, and Maynapur have yielded an abundance of Jain artifacts, underscoring the widespread influence of Jainism in Bankura. These sites not only house idols and temple ruins but also provide evidence of the economic and social structures that supported Jain religious practices. Wealthy merchants and landowners played a crucial role in this development. Merchant guilds involved in industries like Sankabhanik, Tambuli, and Tasar were instrumental in funding the construction of temples and commissioning idols, ensuring the religion's prosperity in the region.

Apart from temples and idols, there are other significant Jain remnants scattered across the district. For example, the village of Birsinghpur-Rajhati contains ruins of Jain temples believed to have been built with the financial support of affluent merchants. Similarly, the sites at Shalda, Bhuyhara, and Jaipur have revealed artifacts that point to a thriving Jain culture, including tools, inscriptions, and ornamental carvings that once adorned temple walls.

The distribution of these relics along major riverbanks highlights the symbiotic relationship between the region's geography and the spread of Jainism. The rivers not only facilitated trade and communication but also served as conduits for religious dissemination, allowing Jain monks and devotees to establish their presence in even the most remote areas. These archaeological remains, therefore, stand as enduring testaments to the profound impact Jainism had on the cultural and religious landscape of Bankura.

The Decline of Jainism

By the 12th century CE, Jainism in Bankura began to experience a significant decline. The reasons for this downturn were multifaceted, involving political shifts, cultural integration, and social transformations.

One of the primary factors contributing to the decline of Jainism was the fall of the Pala dynasty and the rise of the Sena kings, who were strong patrons of Brahminical Hinduism. Although the Sena rulers did not forcibly suppress Jainism, their support for Hinduism gradually overshadowed the Jain influence. This shift in royal patronage led to a decline in resources and support for Jain temples and monasteries, marking the beginning of the religion's diminished prominence in the region.

Another critical factor was the integration of Jain practices and deities into the Hindu fold. Over time, Jain temples were repurposed for Hindu worship, and Jain deities were absorbed into the Hindu pantheon. For instance, the Ambika Temple in Ambikanagar, initially dedicated to a Jain Yakshi, was transformed into a Shakta shrine. This syncretism blurred the distinctions between Jainism and Hinduism, leading to the gradual erosion of Jain identity in Bankura.

Economic and social changes also played a role in the decline of Jainism. As the influence of wealthy Jain merchants waned, the financial support required to sustain temples and monasteries dwindled. Additionally, the increasing dominance of Hindu social and religious institutions marginalized Jain communities, further accelerating their assimilation into the broader Hindu society.

By the 14th century CE, Jainism had all but disappeared from Bankura. Its temples, idols, and cultural practices were either repurposed or abandoned, leaving behind remnants that speak to a once-thriving religious tradition. Despite this decline, the legacy of Jainism endures in the region's art, architecture, and cultural practices, offering a glimpse into its profound historical significance.

Syncretism and Transformation

The syncretism between Jainism and Hinduism in Bankura was a gradual yet transformative process that unfolded over centuries. One significant avenue of this assimilation was the reinterpretation of Jain Tirthankaras as Hindu deities. For instance, Parsvanatha, depicted with a seven-serpent canopy in Jain traditions, was transformed into the serpent goddess Manasa, a widely revered deity in South Bankura. This conceptual blending not only ensured the survival of Jain symbolism but also allowed it to thrive within a Hindu framework.

Temples originally dedicated to Jain worship were often repurposed for Hindu rituals. In many cases, the original Jain idols were either integrated

into new religious contexts or left as relics within temple premises. The Shiva temples in Bhuyhara and Satapata, for instance, house Jain idols embedded in their outer walls, serving as silent witnesses to the region's religious transformation. These shared spaces highlight the adaptive nature of religious practices and the overlapping spiritual landscapes of Jainism and Hinduism.

Cultural practices also played a pivotal role in the syncretic evolution. Jain principles, such as strict asceticism and the ideal of non-violence, found echoes in local Hindu traditions. The rituals observed during festivals like Shiva Gajan and Charak Mela bear traces of Jain austerity, emphasizing self-mortification and spiritual endurance. These festivals, while rooted in Hindu practices, carry an underlying thread of Jain influence that reflects the deep cultural integration between the two faiths.

Archaeological Losses and Discoveries

The archaeological history of Bankura reveals a rich repository of Jain relics, yet it is also marred by significant losses due to modern developments. Extensive surveys and excavations conducted in the 20th century brought to light several Jain artifacts, but many were destroyed or submerged as part of infrastructure projects. One prominent example is the Kangsavati-Kumari Reservoir Project, which led to the flooding of numerous historical sites, including forests and ancient Jain remains. The submersion erased parts of Bankura's tangible cultural history, including temples, idols, and inscriptions that could have provided deeper insights into the region's Jain heritage.

Despite these losses, archaeologists unearthed important discoveries that underscore Jainism's once-thriving presence in Bankura. Excavations in villages such as Harmasara, Kechanda, and Ambikanagar yielded Jain idols, intricately carved temple ruins, and inscriptions bearing historical significance. These findings highlight the region's vibrant Jain culture, showcasing its artistic achievements and religious contributions. For instance, the laterite stone idols of Parsvanatha and other Tirthankaras, often adorned with symbolic motifs, reflect the advanced craftsmanship and devotion of the Jain communities that once inhabited the area.

Fieldwork conducted by archaeologists like Devala Mitra and Rakhalda Bandyopadhyay further revealed scattered relics in places such as Bhuyhara, Shalda, and Birsinghpur-Rajhati. These discoveries provide a glimpse into the architectural and cultural sophistication of ancient Jain settlements, underscoring their role in shaping the district's historical narrative. However, the lack of preservation efforts and the continued impact

of urbanization threaten the survival of these invaluable remnants, emphasizing the need for sustained heritage conservation.

Contributions of Key Scholars

The rich history of Jainism in Bankura has been brought to light largely through the diligent work of scholars and archaeologists who have meticulously studied its relics and cultural impact. Amiyakumar Bandyopadhyay was among the first to emphasize the dominance of Jainism in the region until the 12th century CE, providing critical insights into its extensive patronage and influence. His research highlighted the social and economic frameworks that supported Jainism, shedding light on the merchant guilds and affluent communities that funded temple construction and artistic endeavours.

Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay's studies of Jain statues and temples added a new dimension to the understanding of Jainism's artistic achievements in Bankura. His observations on the intricate craftsmanship of Tirthankara idols and temple architecture underscored the sophistication of Jain artistry, while his documentation of sites like Kechanda and Ambikanagar helped preserve their historical significance. Similarly, Devala Mitra's extensive fieldwork and scholarly contributions enriched the understanding of Jainism's spread and decline in the region. Her publications on Jain antiques and inscriptions from Bankura remain invaluable resources for historians and archaeologists alike.

Together, these scholars have not only chronicled the history of Jainism in Bankura but also highlighted the urgent need to protect its heritage. Their work serves as a foundation for ongoing research and preservation efforts, ensuring that the legacy of Jainism in the region continues to inspire future generations.

Religious Transformation and Legacy

The integration of Jainism into the broader Hindu fold did not signify its disappearance but rather its transformation into a shared cultural and religious legacy. Jain ideals and symbols became deeply interwoven with local traditions, influencing art, architecture, and religious practices across Bankura. Temples originally dedicated to Jain Tirthankaras were repurposed for Hindu worship, creating unique spaces where the two traditions coexisted. For instance, the Krishna temple in Dharapat and the Shiva temple in Satapata retain remnants of Jain iconography, blending Jain and Hindu elements in their architecture.

Folk traditions and festivals in Bankura also reflect Jain influences. The ideals of self-restraint, asceticism, and non-violence central to Jain philosophy resonate in the rituals observed during Shiva Gajan and Charak Mela. These festivals, while rooted in Hindu practices, incorporate elements of spiritual endurance and self-mortification that echo Jain principles. Such syncretism underscores the dynamic interplay between the two faiths, illustrating how Jain values have permeated local culture.

The symbolic transformation of Jain deities into Hindu counterparts further highlights this integration. Parsvanatha, for instance, evolved into the serpent goddess Manasa, a deity widely worshipped in South Bankura. This conceptual blending ensured the preservation of Jain imagery while adapting it to fit within the Hindu pantheon. Similarly, the laterite idols of Tirthankaras found in temples and shrines across the district serve as enduring reminders of Jainism's influence, even as they occupy spaces dedicated to Hindu worship.

The religious and cultural legacy of Jainism in Bankura is thus a testament to its adaptability and resilience. While Jainism as an independent force declined over time, its integration into the local Hindu traditions enriched the region's spiritual and cultural heritage. This legacy endures in the shared spaces, practices, and symbols that continue to define Bankura's religious identity, offering a powerful reminder of the region's rich and pluralistic history.

Conclusion

The history of Jainism in Bankura is a testament to the dynamic interplay of religion, culture, and politics. From its origins in the early centuries BCE to its integration into Hindu traditions, Jainism profoundly shaped the region's identity. While its influence has diminished, the remnants of Jain temples, idols, and cultural practices stand as enduring markers of a once-thriving tradition. The story of Jainism in Bankura highlights not only the religion's resilience but also its ability to adapt and merge with the evolving cultural landscape of Eastern India.

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