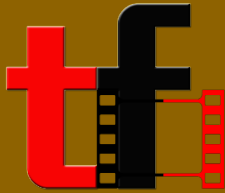


Chaitra Sankranti and Pohela Boishakh Celebration Among Sylheti and Comilla-Speaking Bengali Hindus: A Comparative Study



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Abstract

Bengali communities all over the world celebrate Chaitra Sankranti, the end of the Bengali calendar year, and Pohela Boishakh, the joyous festival that heralds in the new year. These festivals are more than just cultural gatherings; they are powerful symbols of renewal, optimism, and community unity. These usually take place in the month of April and mark the passing of time by letting people introspect on the past year while also making plans and promises for the coming year. h communities have a Bengali history, the regional rites and customs they observe reflect the region's vast cultural variety. Moreover, in a changing South Asian setting, this study examines how these events support local identity, cultural pride, and communal unity in addition to advancing greater societal development. The relationship between tradition and modernity is shown in this article's detailed explanation of how these cultural festivals affect the formation of individual and collective identities in modern South Asian nations.

Keywords

Bengali Communities, Cultural Identity, Chaitra Sankranti, Pohela Boishakh, Sylheti and Comilla Hindus

Methodology

A combination of fieldwork, interviews, and textual analysis was used to investigate the rites and festivities of Chaitra Sankranti and Pohela Boishakh among Bengali Hindus from Sylheti and Comilla. The research was based on direct observations, casual talks with community members, and an in-depth examination of cultural traditions described in regional literature and scholarly works. Interactions with priests, village elders, and housewives who actively participate in festival preparations were attempted. Through these exchanges, personal knowledge of the customs, their symbolic meaning, and the evolution of these traditions was gained. Festivals in Sylheti and Comilla families were studied to discover distinguishing aspects in rituals, food offerings, and community meetings. These observations were important in collecting aspects

that are frequently forgotten in written documents. To better understand the origins and evolution of these festivals, we consulted relevant anthropological research, regional literary works, and historical texts. This helped to place present behaviours in historical and theological settings. Finally, a comparative analysis was used to emphasise the similarities and contrasts in how Sylheti and Comilla-speaking people celebrate these events. This research was critical in demonstrating the underlying cultural ethos as well as the specific local modifications that distinguish their individual identities.

Introduction

Bengali Hindus actively participate in a wide range of fairs, festivals, and religious activities throughout the year in both Bangladesh and India. These festivals are profoundly established in their cultural and religious past, and each month brings a variety of observances, each with its own importance. Most of these festivals are directly or indirectly related to religious scriptures and traditions, a beautiful confluence of faith and cultural tradition. This continuous chain of festivals has had a significant impact on Bengali Hindus' cultural identity, serving not only as occasions for communal joy and unity but also as a means of conserving their cultural legacy. Among the many holidays observed, Pohela Boishakh and Chaitra Sankranti are particularly important in their cultural and religious calendar. Pohela Boishakh, the Bengali New Year, is celebrated with unbridled passion and a harmonious blend of religious and cultural traditions. It marks a new beginning, an opportunity to put the hardships of the previous year behind us and welcome new beginnings with hope and enthusiasm. The day is characterised by colourful processions, traditional music and dance performances, and parties including festive feasts and traditional costumes. Chaitra Sankranti, the final day of the Bengali calendar, is profoundly steeped in Hindu customs. It is a day of spiritual contemplation, a time to express thanks for the gifts of the previous year and to plan for the coming year. Chaitra Sankranti coincides scientifically with the sun's entry into Aries, which is an important astrological event. For Bengali Hindus, however, the religious and cultural observances that surround the festival are most important. Chaitra Sankranti is observed with ceremonies and traditions that show its connection to Hindu scripture. Devotees on this day fast, pray to deities, and take part in charitable activities to purify their spirits and receive favours for the future. These traditions are blended with symbolism, symbolising appreciation for the previous year and an optimistic welcome to the new one.

Despite differences, Bengali Hindus do not form a single, homogenous group. The community is made up of many regional identities. Each of them has their own customs, practices, and cultural characteristics. These differences can be noticed in their language, in pronunciation, and in the choice of vocabulary, as well as in their food habits, ceremonies, and daily activities. However, the essence of their festivals remains mostly unchanged, bringing people together and instilling a strong feeling of community despite regional differences.

Observation of the festivals of Chaitra Sankranti and Pohela Boishakh among the Sylheti and Comilla-speaking Bengali Hindus reveals similarities as well as differences. The basic ideas of these festivals—gratitude, renewal, and community—are shared by both

communities. However, how they celebrate differs. Sylheti people may have unique songs, customs, or foods that are distinct from those among the Comilla group. These differences make the festivities more vibrant and unique while preserving the shared customs that bring everyone together. Through these festivals, Bengali Hindus do more than simply celebrate—they actively uphold and cherish their cultural and religious traditions. These events give individuals and families the opportunity to reconnect with their heritage, reflecting on the values and customs passed down through the ages. Festivals like these are important to keep Bengali Hindu culture alive. They give each new generation the opportunity and encouragement to adapt these traditions. Whether through religious ceremonies, cultural events, or simply spending time with family, these festivals are not just moments of joy—they are a way of affirming life's continuity. Through these celebrations, Bengali Hindus ensure their cultural practices remain unscathed and try to pass them on to the future generation with the belief that their tradition, their cultural heritage, keeps going on by staying true to the roots that have shaped their identity.

Demographic Distribution of Sylheti And Comilla Speaking Hindus

Sylheti-speaking Hindus Predominantly found in Bangladesh's Sylhet Division and in northeastern India, including Tripura and Assam's Barak Valley. Sylheti Hindus, known for their distinct speech and culinary traditions, frequently include elements from Assamese and Manipuri cultures. Comilla-speaking Hindus They primarily live in Bangladesh's Comilla District, as well as India's West and East Tripura Provinces. Their cultural expressions are characterised by a mix of mainstream Bengali Hindu traditions and local variations. Besides Both communities have huge diasporas dispersed over the globe, which help to preserve and evolve their cultural identities.

Chaitra Sankranti and Pohela Boishakh Celebration among Sylheti Speaking Hindus

The celebrations begin early in the morning on Chaitra Sankranti, a day of significance and reverence. Families wake up before morning to purify their bodies and spirits with a refreshing bathing routine. Instead of conventional soap, they use a special paste produced from natural elements like neem, tulsi, and turmeric. This traditional combination is thought to have antibacterial characteristics and offers several skin advantages, making it a popular choice among health-conscious folks. The scent of the herbal mixture permeates the air, creating a sense of purity and rebirth. At the door of their homes, families hang fresh neem leaves as a symbol of health and well-being. The belief behind this practice is the idea that the natural properties of neem leaves can prevent illness and promote good health in the home for the upcoming year. It is thought to act as a shield of protection and give the houses a feeling of safety and good fortune. Following the completion of the cleaning rites, families focus on making offerings for their gods. Prayer offerings, which feature a range of exquisitely handmade prasads, are produced with a great deal of dedication. They include a variety of homemade delights, including Luchi, a delicious deep-fried flatbread made with sweet laddus and creamy semolina pudding. The preparation of these delicious items is traditionally a family affair, with everyone gathering in the kitchen to share their skills and knowledge. One of the

gastronomic centrepieces of this festival is Chatu, a unique blend. This unique delicacy is made up of eight distinct types of puffed foods that are mashed together and topped with crispy fried neem leaves. The process of cooking and sharing these delicacies is more than just a source of sustenance; it also evokes feelings of cultural pride and heritage. On this auspicious day, non-vegetarian food is strictly prohibited, emphasising the significance of the occasion. Among the many delicacies, Pachan has a prominent position in the festivities. This mixed vegetable meal, cooked with Aath Anaj, or eight different veggies, includes the popular mango and jackfruit as important ingredients. The use of green mango in tangy Daal follows local culinary traditions, and sour Daal is traditionally served on this day. The sour taste of the Daal, along with the unripe jackfruit, provides depth to the dish and demonstrates the region's abundant agricultural riches. Once the food has been cooked, it is delivered to the deities as Bhog (offerings). This religious gesture entails laying the food on a wide plate or banana leaf, which is then presented in an open area away from the rush and bustle of daily life. Following that, the family members participate in a traditional ceremony in which they do not glance back to see what is going on behind them, since it is thought that the ancestors consume the offerings and bestow blessings on subsequent generations. This heartbreaking moment strengthens the bond between the living and the dead, emphasising the value of family tradition.

In the afternoon, families assemble for a bustling religious festival commemorating Charak Puja. This historic ceremony honours Lord Shiva and includes the worship of the Charak tree, a symbol of fertility and expansion. The fair is a stunning sight, with brightly coloured kiosks and a bustling audience. As the day approaches for Charak Puja, believers and worshippers dress themselves in elaborate costumes to symbolise deities such as Shiva, Parvati, and Kali. This joyful procession moves through the villages, accompanied by musicians playing traditional instruments and filling the air with rhythmic sounds. During the fair, followers known as Gajans perform a variety of impressive yogic feats, such as body piercing and swinging from a Charak tree. This tree, which grows to be about 30-40 feet tall and has no roots or branches, acts as a focal point for the festivities. It is inserted into the ground by digging a hole. The Gajans express their commitment through these dramatic performances, which are both exhibitions of physical endurance and acts of spiritual intensity. The fair offers a variety of products, including household items, handloom fabrics, toys, and an exciting selection of local delicacies, inviting families to enjoy the pleasures of the fair.

As the sun sets, the festivities continue in homes with Kirtan (devotional singing), which creates a quiet mood of reverence and thankfulness. Families assemble around their altars, chanting hymns of adoration to the gods and goddesses and expressing their hopes and desires for the next year. This devotion culminates on the following day, which is Pohela Boishakh, or Bengali New Year. On this auspicious day, the air is filled with enthusiasm, and families join together to celebrate with magnificent feasts and joyful gatherings. Wearing new clothes is a popular practice that represents new beginnings and prospects. Individuals, regardless of economic level, strive to keep this tradition alive, emphasising the value of community and shared delight. The lunches on Pohela Boishakh are a feast for the senses, with a variety of rich delicacies such as chicken, mutton, and fish, with Hilsa being the standout. Flavourful rice, spicy curries, and a variety of desserts like Pittah, Sandesh, Rasgulla, and curd round out the festive meal. A sense of community is created by eating meals together with loved ones, strengthening social ties and fostering wholesome connections. People also typically extend invitations to each other for lunch and dinner in order to greet and wish each

other a happy New Year. In addition to fortifying links within the community, this practice fosters a friendly environment where people can ask their elders for blessings. Pohela Boishakh is a particularly unique occasion for everyone participating, as the celebrations capture the essence of love, appreciation, and ethnic pride as laughter and pleasure flood the houses.

Chaitra Sankranti and Pohela Boishakh Celebration among Comilla Speaking Hindus

Sankranti celebrations among Hindus who speak Comilla usually start two or three days before the celebration. Careful and diligent preparations are undertaken at this period, especially for the food items that will be served as prasad later on. Beans and sweet potatoes are two essential preparations. Cut sweet potatoes and normal potatoes into small pieces to start the process. Using weaving instruments, these tiny pieces are then utilised to make vermicelli, a delicacy that resembles thin noodles. After being gently stretched out on a bamboo mat, the vermicelli is left to dry in the sun for at least two days in a row. Vermicelli is made firm and ready for use in a variety of recipes by the drying process. It's interesting to note that boiling bean seeds can also be used to make vermicelli, offering a healthy substitute. Sweet laddus, which are spherical, ball-shaped treats, are made by combining dried vermicelli with molasses, a traditional sweetening agent, once Sankranti arrives. As a religious food gift known as Prasad, these laddus are presented to God. Additionally, tamarind and molasses are used to make another unique Prasad, which combines a sweet and sour taste. Following these, the tamarind-molasses combination and the vermicelli laddus are both put into an earthen pot for Prasad. Then, for a week, this pot is suspended from the temple's roof. During this period, a unique ritual is followed by the person in charge of the pot and daily worship. For the full seven days, they only eat fruits and refrain from eating rice, a custom said to cleanse the body and the psyche. The earthen pot is ceremoniously removed at the conclusion of the week, and the prasad within is once more offered to God. Following the second offering, the prasad is divided up among the household members so that each person gets a piece. In order to spread the blessings beyond the immediate family, it is also shared with neighbours. There is a long-standing notion that eating this Prasad will make you live a longer life. Due to Prasad's positive energy and divine benefits, those who consume these sacred offerings are believed to live longer than usual. From the vermicelli's preparation to Prasad's ultimate distribution, the entire process is infused with custom, dedication, and a strong feeling of community. They fed their ancestors, known as Baran, just like the Sylheti did.

The New Year celebration described is a perfect blend of devotion, familial respect, and gratitude to nature, all strongly established in cultural and agricultural traditions. The morning starts with younger family members welcoming elders with *pranam*, which represents reverence and the transmission of ideals through generations. In response, the elders wish the young a prosperous year, promoting a sense of familial solidarity. Cows are bathed, decked with flower garlands, and praised by agricultural workers, signifying their hallowed position and crucial role in agrarian livelihoods. Farming tools and implements are likewise revered, stressing thankfulness for the resources that allow life to exist. The day concludes with a communal feast to celebrate togetherness and the culinary legacy passed down through generations.

These rituals have significant social and theological consequences. Socially, they promote family relationships and community spirit by recognising the value of effort and the

interconnection of individuals to their surroundings. Religiously, the rituals represent gratitude and devotion, which aligns with Hindu ideas that see divinity in work, nature, and animals. Cow worship, which is revered in Hinduism as mother, whereas tool worship emphasises the holiness of labor. Together, these rituals promote the ideals of respect, gratitude, and rejuvenation, providing a holistic view of life that connects spirituality and everyday living.

Similarities and Divergences

Both Sylheti-speaking and Comilla-speaking Hindu populations celebrate the Bengali New Year, or Pohela Boishakh, as a time of immense festivities and cultural richness. It is a day full of customs, festive activities, and ceremonies that honour these communities' common ancestry. Among the most obvious features of this festival is the traditional clothing worn for the occasion. To foster a sense of solidarity and cultural pride, men in both communities wear the traditional dhoti with a Punjabi, while women dress in exquisite sarees, frequently in vivid hues that represent happiness and success. Both groups celebrate Charak Puja, a ceremonial holiday in the afternoon where followers offer prayers for wealth and health. Kirtan, a type of devotional singing that unites communities in a common expression of joy and spirituality, fills the air in the evening. Making new promises or taking new vows is a significant aspect of Pohela Boishakh. In both communities, this is typical. People are looking forward to the future with optimism at this time, making new personal objectives and asking for elder blessings. Because they are thought to bring good fortune for the upcoming year, the blessings of previous generations are seen as essential. Families get together to re-establish their ties and give thanks for the previous year, marking a time of spiritual and personal rejuvenation. Both of the community's New Year celebrations include cultural programs. Various cultural groups and local governments arrange events such as poetry readings, singing performances, and traditional dances to promote the diversity of Bengali heritage. Local artists take centre stage, sharing their talents and keeping the region's artistic traditions alive. One of the most anticipated festivals is the Boishakhi Mela, a bustling fair that attracts people from all walks of life. Families and friends get together to enjoy wonderful food, homemade crafts, exciting music, and entertainment. The mela creates a welcoming and open environment in which communities can celebrate the happy spirit of the New Year.

Another important aspect of New Year celebrations in both of these groups is the *Haal Khata* festival, also known as *Gadi Shait* in Sylhet. This is especially relevant for the business world, which sees it as an opportunity for new beginnings in their financial affairs. During *Haal Khata*, merchants close off their previous year's financial records and open new account books. Lord *Ganesh*, the deity of wealth and success, is worshipped on this day, which marks the start of a fruitful new year for companies. The practice is accompanied by a special puja in which shop owners invite their customers to pay off any outstanding debts, signifying a clean slate and new beginnings in their financial connections. As a show of respect and dedication, many devotees fast before the *Ganesh* Puja and only eat vegetarian meals afterward. Non-vegetarian food, which is an important feature of Bengali cuisine, is typically reserved for the second day of Boishakh, allowing the first day to be entirely dedicated to religious observance and introspection. The emphasis on fasting, prayer, and the opening of new account books reflects a strong cultural value of beginning the year in spiritual and material purity.

The rituals, dress, food, and festivals all combine to form a rich and elaborate tapestry of celebration in which spirituality, culture, and tradition coexist together. From the vivid colours of traditional costumes to the exquisite flavours of festive dishes, each piece contributes to a sensory experience steeped in history and collective memory. The rhythmic beats of traditional music, the chanting of mantras, and the joyful gathering of family and communities all add to the essence of the celebration.

Conclusion

A comparison of the Chaitra Sankranti and Pohela Boishakh festivals among Sylheti and Comilla-speaking Bengali Hindus reveals an intriguing interaction of shared cultural history and diverse regional practices. Both groups, which are strongly steeped in the larger Bengali Hindu traditions, commemorate these festivals with excitement, devotion, and a sense of renewal. Though the general themes of Chaitra Sankranti are bidding farewell to the previous and welcoming the new year on Pohela Boishakh are shared by both, the intricacies in their celebrations add a unique regional flavour that shows the diversity of the Bengali identity. Sylheti-speaking Hindus linked the festivals with purifying rituals such as the use of neem leaves and herbal pastes, as well as symbolic offerings such as Chatu and Pachan. Their focus on ancestor worship, which includes presenting Bhog in a special rite that seeks blessings from deceased souls, links their customs to family history. The vibrant Charak Puja, with its awe-inspiring performances, connects this community's celebration to Lord Shiva and underscores their distinctive engagement with nature and spirituality.

On the other hand, Comilla-speaking Hindus exhibit similar religious devotion but introduce different culinary traditions and ritual practices, especially in terms of food offerings like the sweet vermicelli Prasad and the tamarind-molasses mixture. The cultural emphasis on the Haal Khata ceremony, or Gadi Shait, particularly reflects the community's deep connection to commerce and new financial beginnings, which aligns with their aspirations for prosperity in the coming year. Their observance of vegetarianism on the first day, followed by feasting on the second, shows a balance of religious piety and communal joy. Despite these regional differences, both communities emphasise unity, cultural pride, and the renewal of social and familial bonds during these festivals. Through their shared customs—like the wearing of traditional attire, devotional singing (Kirtan), and participation in fairs and melas—the Sylheti and Comilla Hindus celebrate their common Bengali heritage while also expressing their distinct regional identities. This comparative study confirms the title by highlighting how Sylheti and Comilla-speaking Hindus share Bengali Hindu traditions and add their own cultural and regional components to the Chaitra Sankranti and Pohela Boishakh festivals. It emphasises the wide diversity of Bengali cultural customs, demonstrating both unity and difference within the larger Hindu Bengali population.

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