



WEEKLY VILLAGE MARKET IN THE FOLKLORE OF THE RADH REGION OF BENGAL: A VENTURE THROUGH RHYMES AND RIDDLES

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ABSTRACT

Weekly Village markets have been at the centre of village life of the Radh region of Bengal through ages. These markets have been the places of confluence of different types of people of village society. The days these markets become operative are usually waited for with lots of expectations and with great excitement by village people even today. All the limitations of village life are attempted to be overcome through them. Hence these markets are having almost innumerable references and depictions in folklores, to be specific in oral traditions, especially in rhymes and riddles which are usually secular in nature but in some cases they are quasi-religious. These folklores are social texts bearing specific anthropological nuances that do often depict the predominant trend of social evolution. These village markets are having direct links with the lives and livelihoods of village artisans. They are quite significant instruments for depiction of village life, its evolution rather mobility and for having a psychoanalytic view of village life.

INTRODUCTION

Weekly Village markets have been at the centre of village life of the Radh region of Bengal through ages. These markets have been the places of confluence of different types of people of village society. The days these markets become operative are usually waited for with lots of expectations and with great excitement by village people even today. All the limitations of village life are attempted to be overcome through them. Hence these markets are having almost innumerable references and depictions in folklores, to be specific in oral traditions, especially in rhymes and riddles which are usually secular in nature but in some cases they are quasi-religious. These folklores are social texts bearing specific anthropological nuances that do often depict the predominant trend of social evolution. These village markets are having direct links with the lives and livelihoods of village artisans. They are quite significant instruments for depiction of village life, its evolution rather mobility and for having a psychoanalytic view of village life.

The rhymes and riddles I am going to refer here are from East Burdwan, West Burdwan, Bankura, Birbhum and Murshidabad. These oral traditions can either be traced back up to the later half of the 19th Century or up to the first half of the 20th Century. Let me provide a couple of examples, one of a rhyme and the other of a riddle bearing specific references and depictions of weekly village market. The rhyme is collected from Birbhum and is having a dialogic pattern,

“Why has Ranu wept? She has cooked with damp fuel.

I will go to the weekly market of the suburb tomorrow and will purchase dry fuel for her”.

The weekly village market here is projected as the source of all possible materials to turn one's life trouble-free and buying and selling have been depicted as the key aspect of these markets. Ranu had a trouble in cooking with damp fuel and the speaker does not want her to face the same trouble again. Damp wood causes much smoke and the eyes of the cook burn profusely enough to bring tears in them. The speaker is most probably the male guardian of Ranu and the rhyme depicts the function of patriarchy in the village society of Bengal in the first half of the 20th Century. One could see various things in such a market, but the most common among them still now a days is the weighing scale. It being the main instrument

behind most of the purchase and sale draws one's attention to give birth to a riddle projecting weighing scale in a roundabout way in Bankura,

“I have seen an unusual thing in the weekly market of Dutta Para.

It has eight legs, two knees and a tail on its back “

These rhymes and riddles have not only depicted village life but have also secured their place in rural life as marks of evolution and of the shifting trends of village life of Bengal. Along with the evolution of the village society these folklores have themselves been evolved to a great extent to cope with the changing social psyche. Hence these rhymes and riddles are as living as the village society of Bengal.

The verbose referring to a custom that talks about a continuous tradition of survival of ethnic identity amidst changing socio-cultural and religious contexts that have nevertheless resulted in the accumulation of a colossal amount of information and mention may be made of the attempts of Lal Behari Dey, Dakkhinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, Dinesh Chandra Sen, William McCulloch, Rabindranath Tagore and others. However, mostly all of these data were limited in nature with the exclusion of further scrutiny of contexts, causes and implications. Nevertheless, it is also significant to mention that each and every of these attempts also provided a rich source of study for future reference works and researches, acting as the mainstay, strength and support for various studies of varied disciplines including, folk culture, linguistics, sociology, philosophy and literature. Most of these data collected from the Radh, over the last century, are generally in the form of rhymes and riddles. At closer observation, they can be further divided between eastern and western Bengal, with the former constituting a significant section of the erstwhile eastern Bengal or most parts of the country of Bangladesh and the latter was formed of prominent parts of modern western Bengal, including the erstwhile Jangalmahal - constituting parts of modern Jharkhand and parts of Orissa and also the present region of study—the Radh region. Geophysical constituents made the two regions differ in nature, flora and fauna with the former being more fertile and well-drained, fed by both perennial and non-perennial rivers and the latter forming sections of a more arid region of the Chhotanagpur plateau. Difference in landscapes naturally evoke an image of diverse habitation, however interestingly enough, the folklore in the form of fables, riddles and poems, contained a continuous strain, which spoke of the proximity of the regions and also the remarkable possibilities of their traveling from one region to another.

With a history of varied religious influences, including Jainism, Tantric Buddhism, Vaisnavism, Saivism, Saktaism, Brahmanism, Islam and finally Christianity, the region under study experienced various changes in thought processes, political scenarios and cultural affiliations. As the larger representation portrayed motley of heterogeneous and diverse socio-cultural elements, it is also important to mention about the minor depiction in the form of ethnic identities. This was prominent through the importance of folk divinities and deities and local ruling authorities, which helped to strengthen the native history to a great extent. The present paper focuses on this character and distinctiveness of the region, which helped to shape the regional socio-cultural and religious ethos. The paper looks into a brief history of the region which influenced the local religious belief structure and in turn also influenced the local lore and fables that exist today as a mode of continuous human communication between existing societies and religions. Amidst this, ecology occupies a significant pivotal role, aiding the diachronic development of thought processes down the path of history.

The significance of folklore of this region also lies in its tradition, which speaks of a parallel belief structure alongside the mainstream - so-called Brahminical religious belief system in the region - which has oft been repeated in the writings of historians and linguists like Niharranjan Ray, Suniti K. Chattopadhyay and others. The lore is helpful in not only understanding the settlement patterns, migrations and change of habitation, reflection of day-to-day activities and anxieties concerning livelihood, but also reflects a story of continuous struggle for acceptance within a framework of society, which, historically speaking, has been dominated by sections of higher caste with the 'vratyas' (the marginalized people) occupying a secondary role down the path of regional history. The region under study Archaeological records provide vital information pertaining to settlement pattern of the region in relation to the local inhabitants from the very early times, however, it is not until the Historical/Late Historical periods, that information pertaining to religious as well as developing economic activities are available. However, the origin of fables and lore is difficult to measure nevertheless, and cannot be studied with historical references till later times.

In some cases these rhymes and riddles got evolved along with time and space. We do often get different forms of the same rhyme having different nuances and significances. In the first couplet of a rhyme a mother is found asking her daughter to go with her to a weekly village market and wishes to buy and share a 'paan' (stuffed betel leaf) with her. The name of the daughter varies in different versions along with the motif depicted in the later couplet. In

the usually uttered version there is a sense of getting cheated in the market as one of the 'paans' bought by the mother and daughter is found empty as the betel leaf is not at all stuffed but in another version, usually uttered in the western part of Murshidabad and in the eastern part of Birbhum we find depiction of precious flowers which are being sold in the market. In this particular case the market must have been selling various other products too. But the speaker is only referring 'paan', and precious flowers. The specific region of Murshidabad and Birbhum we find this version is having comparatively dry climactic conditions, hence betel leaf and precious flowers are not quite readily available in this area. This is probably the reason behind the change in this version. Along with it the change in the name of the daughter in different versions are usually caused by inclusion of one's own daughter while uttering the rhyme. This kind of shift is quite a regular a phenomenon in such oral texts. Let me present three versions of the rhyme I am mentioning. The call of the mother to the daughter to go to the weekly village market is bearing a significant social practice of women visiting such a market without any male guardian.

Version I:

“Come Ranga let us go to a weekly village market,

Let us purchase and have a 'paan' each.

One of those is found unstuffed,

The mother and daughter quarrel over that”

Version II:

“Come Labanga let us go to a weekly village market,

Let us purchase and have a 'paan' each.

One of those is found unstuffed,

The mother and daughter quarrel over that.”

Version III:

Come Kamala let us go to a weekly village market,

Let us purchase and have a 'paan' and betel nut each.

Lots of flowers are available in the market,

They are very precious.”

In the eastern part of Murshidabad we find another rhyme with the proposition of buying and sharing ‘paan’. But this time the proposition is from a husband to his wives. Two of them are mentioned here and are mentioned as ‘biwi’. As it is usually done in Muslim community we can guess the regio-cultural background of it. Polygamy is probably the most significant element present in this rhyme. Both the wives are mentioned as wearing foot wares hence it can be understood that the monetary condition of the family is not at least miserable. These rhymes with references of ‘paan’ are uttered almost in the entire Radh region, hence we can guess that tasteful ‘paans’ were not that readily available in the first half of the 20th Century.

“Wife Aram is wearing wooden sandal,

Wife Lal is wearing shoes.

Come wives, let us go to the weekly village market,

Let us buy and share a paan each”

Along with these short rhymes there are some chain rhymes too. They are usually arranged as a series of questions and answers. The most fascinating one among them is of East Burdwan. It deals with both buying and selling in a weekly village market. All the previously mentioned rhymes dealt with buying from such a market. Hence the series of questions and answers present in it is quite significant.

“O Mona! Where are you going?

Off to the riverside for cutting grass.

What’ll you do with it?

I’ll sell it tomorrow

And will purchase a net with coloured threads.

What’ll you do with the net?

I’ll catch lots of fish at the turn of the river.

What’ll you do with the fish?

I’ll sell them in the ‘haat’.

I'll buy lots of sarees instead.

I'll gift jute-saree to sister,

And I'll gift mom colourful pot.”

In this rhyme the role such 'haats' play even in the contemporary period in rural Bengal becomes quite apparent. Its predominant tone is positive in nature and it cultivates a practice of making simple but fruitful plans for future. On the contrary there are a few chain rhymes, which are negative in tone and do depict a bleak portrayal of a weekly village market which has ceased to remain operative any longer.

“Where is my fish? Snatched away by an egret.

Where is the egret? Sitting on the branch of a tree.

Where is the branch? It has been broken.

Where are the broken parts? Washer man has taken.

Where is the washerman? Gone to the market.

Where is it? It has ceased to remain operative.”

Initially the fish has been taken off, whereas the branch has been broken and the remnants have been taken away by the washerman, who has gone to the weekly village market, which is no longer operative. Hence the entire portrayal is bleak and mournful. This particular rhyme has another version usually popular in West Burdwan.

“O Dear! Where is your son?

On the mango tree.

What is he doing?

Curving a stool.

It's for whom?

For his aunt.

Where is she?

Beside the pond.

Where is it?

Devoured by water hen.

Where is that?

Gone to the forest.

Where is the forest?

It has been burnt.

Where are the ashes?

They have been taken off by the washerman.

Where is he?

Gone to the market.

Where is that?

It has ceased to remain operative.”

In both the cases the washerman reaches the weekly village market at the end of the hour of its operation and the market gets closed soon. He probably remains busy with his daily washings till late hours and his financial condition cannot be good enough to prevent him from collecting wood or ashes from his surroundings. Along with this person there are several others whose social and financial conditions are quite weak. Santul is one of them. He is short and dark. His knees are bulged out and his kids cry on the streets when he goes to the weekly village market. His description exhibits him as a person belonging to a lower socioeconomic stratum. His kids are helpless enough to cry on the street whereas the speaker and others try to stop them initially by enticing by proposing to give them some snacks and then by threatening to hurl them on the ground.

“Dark Shantul with his knee bulges

Goes to weekly village market.

His kids cry on the streets.

O Kids! Don't cry.

I'll give you some snacks.

If you still cry

I'll hurl you on the ground”

The kids must have been feeling helpless. They may be hungry or sleepy too. Such hungry or sleepy kids are quite common in rhymes. In one of them there is an imaginary proposition of purchasing sleep for kids. The idea of animatism is quite apparent here. Sleep is also available in that market and is quite cheap too.

“Sleep in market and riverside roams around in the streets.

Bought sleep of four coins

Come in the eyes of my dear”

But all the guardians are not that sympathetic towards their kids. One such parent is dissatisfied with the fish she bought from market and goes to riverside to catch fresh fish whereas her kids are crying for him at home. This rhyme is of south twenty four parganas and the lady mentioned here gets pleasure in catching fish. Hence she puts the load of fish, bought from market on the head of her husband and goes to riverside to catch fish. But her kids are found crying.

“ Boga and Bogi have gone to market to purchase rahu fish.

Where has Bogi gone by putting the load of fish on the head of Boga.

O Bogi! Come back home.

Your kids are crying for you.

Bogi goes fishing everyday.

She has gone to river Khirod today.

She is definitely catching fish there.

And is crashing the small ones which are bleeding.

O Bogi! Come back home.

Your kids are crying for you.

In this way Bengali folk rhymes depict weekly village market in various colourful ways. These markets are linked with several socioeconomic strata, several practices, several

customs, conventions, imaginations, rituals and so on. Some of them are quite humorous in nature too. They bring out the sense of humour of the unidentified speaker who presents his society with certain nooks and corners with absolute perfection.

The riddles on the contrary are related to problems, rather crisis. They bring out mysteries which are to be solved by the listener to get at the crux of the theme based on which they are formed. They are usually of two kinds, one brings out questions, the answer to which is 'haat', the weekly village market, whereas the other section brings out several aspects and materials related to, rather associated with that market.

“It does neither breed nor mature, women don't taste.”

“It does neither breed nor mature, even does not operate at night”.

Till the first half of the 20th Century women did not visit these markets and they ceased to remain operative at night. Hence the answer to both are 'haat' where there are variegated materials assembled here and there. These materials are often depicted through riddles that too bearing prominent trends of Animatism. These riddles do highlight at least one of the products available in 'haat' as the answer of them needs serious contemplation, which is a definite venture of emphasizing the product. The trouble, faced by the listener of the riddles to get at the answer is the key behind this added emphasis and the primary objective behind these riddles is to create this trouble. Let me place a series of such riddles along with their answers collected from different parts of Radh Bengal.

1. “Red-groom goes to market. He is slapped there repeatedly” – Earthen pots.
2. “Red-bride goes to market. He is slapped there repeatedly” – Earthen pots.
3. “Goes to market naked and turns beautiful when ripe” – Tamarind.
4. “Hundred old women go to market and get slapped on face” – Cooking pans.
5. “Fair girl goes to market and gets pinch from all” – Bottle gourde.
6. “White girl goes to market and gets pinch from all” – Bottle gourde.

The usual colour of earthen pots is red, hence they are called 'Red-groom' and 'Red-bride' in the first couple of riddles. They are usually slapped by the customers so that judge how well-made they are. If they are not burnt well or they are having

leakage the sound they will produced when slapped will be a dull one, whereas if they are well-made, they will produce sharp sound.

The tamarind, when green is usually with skin and then the skin is peeled off when ripe. Usually ripe tamarind is taken to market, hence it is called naked in the third riddle and when it turns older its colour becomes more attractive. So it is called beautiful.

Bottle gourde is called 'faire girl' or 'white girl' in the fourth and fifth riddle as its colour is light green and the customers put their nails in them to find is they are green or ripe. Their freshness can also be judged in this way. Hence the pinches are actually the pricking of the customers.

All these riddles thus bring out the titbits of purchasing and selling in weekly village markets. There are some other riddles on these markets. They try to create a kind of mystery to embed certain products sold in these markets. This element of mystery is an added gain from these riddles.

"The red-man goes to market. He wears hundreds of shirts". – Onion.

"I went here and there. I went to the market of Bowda.

I saw a strange thing. I saw leaves on fruits" – Pineapple.

Usually vegetables have a single skin, which has to be pealed. But onion has all scales, which can be pealed. This unusual incident is presented in mysterious way in the first riddle whereas usually fruits are found above leaves, but pineapple has leaves on it. In the same way this unusual happening is presented in the second riddle under the garb of mystery.

There are some other riddles which try to create a humorous atmosphere to depict certain products sold and purchased in such markets.

1. "It becomes partially blind if goes to market" – Earthen pot of card.
2. "It is not eaten but is licked. It is available in market" – Bay leaf.
3. "It's only a name and is of no use. It has got no value if sold in market" – Horse Egg (Nothing).

'Haat' is thus available in various kinds of folk rhymes and riddles. It is associated with both humour and pathos i.e. with crying kids and 'horse egg'. It is

presented with a wide range of products which are purchased and sold in this weekly village market i.e. with pineapples, earthen pots, bottle gourde and so on. This kind of intense involvement between the rural society and 'haat' is the key aspect apparent in these rhymes and riddles. Both the time and the space are tangibly present in them but in certain aspects they transcend both and attains an eternal spirit which has kept them live still now in the age of information technology, social media rat race and so on.

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