



Masan Puja And Masan Painting :A Dying Culture Of Rajbangshi Community In North Bengal

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Abstract:

We know India is a culturally rich and religiously diverse country. Every state has different taste of it which are unique in their own way .It is not possible to cover each of the rituals, traditions ,myths in one paper.For my paper i have focused on a ritual which is very significant to the Rajbangshi people of North Bengal especially in coochbehar. Every belief is related to the origin of any community and interrelated with the heritage of them hence it becomes very important for them.The Rajbanshis worshiped many deities and perform many rituals.One such indigenous belief is 'Masan Puja'.It is losing its importance due to the modernisation and education in the community.This paper also covers the 'Masan painting' inspired by this deity masan that are used during the puja along with the idol.The purpose of this paper is to draw attention to the cultures of small tribal groups which are disappearing over time .

Keywords: Rajbangshi,Folk,Masan, Painting, myth, tradition.

1. Introduction:

We know India is a culturally rich and religiously diverse country. There are numerous rituals, arts, Gods, practices, tradition that represents our nation to the world. Every state of India has their own unique story, myths, rituals which are there for an era. But main focus in this paper will be one of the important tradition of Rajbanshi community. A prominent community in North Bengal and Lower Assam is the Rajvanshi community.

Rajbanshis had separate cultural beliefs and traditions before immigration of 'bangals', which was similar to Hinduism. It is assumed by most historians and social scientists that the Rajbanshis were converted to Hinduism from Koches. There were many non-Aryan Gods and Goddess worshiped by the Rajbanshis as they were basically mixed with Aryan and non-Aryan people. As this community is dependent on farming, most of their tradition, rituals are nature centric and their god, goddess is related to nature. They worship rivers, trees, earth as gods. Their culture didn't get the opportunity to expand throughout the state because of the isolated condition after the separation and also for the modernisation. Very few are in lithic form most of them are alithic. which doesn't have written documentation and only exists as folklore by the ancestors are getting unnoticed and un-practiced.

Any art form developed day by day and became vibrant by influence. nothing is fully authentic if it is a ritual or art form, people learn something from past and perform it with their own creativity and understanding. likewise a culture came to West Bengal e by

the Buddhist tribes in ancient time and get connected with the Rajbangshi tribe named

'masan puja'. along with "masan painting".

1. Origin of this tradition:

It is said that in ancient times the Buddhist Tibet came to west Bengal with their own traditional beliefs. It came in the northern part of bangal and mainly In cities like jalpaiguri, Darjeeling and coochbehar. The pre Buddhist 'Bon' religion was an indigenous Tibetan religion similar to the Hindu concept of nihilism. This mixed religion became akin to Tantric Buddhism and was linked to the treatment of various disease. From this amalgamation, the concept of masan emerged as a deity. Though it is not considered as a god or demon, people address this as 'masan' baba or thakur.

'Masan' is Bengali which means 'smashan' or crematorium in Hindi. They are worshiped far from Residential houses and mainly in crematorium. Despite coming from Tibet, there was an Indianisation of this art form; they have primarily been made by the Rajbanshi tribe that is, today, widespread in Bengal. This is the only tribe still practicing the worship of the Masan Devtas, and this culture is dwindling even amongst them today.

The Lamas left the land but some essence remained. Masan Thakur has been worshiped mainly as a deity in the Jalpaiguri region of Cooch Behar. Sometimes these masanas are worshiped as a companion of Shiva. But This practice is more popular in places like Balasi, Alokjhari, Haldibari, Mekhliganj villages of Dinjata.

2. Appearance of masan:

It is the most dangerous and most dreaded of all spirits. Masan idol is terrible looking that's why Sometimes it is described as evil. it is black or blue in color, full of shaggy hair, a huge jagged mustache, wide eyes, a heavy body with a large belly. He is holding a 'gada' (mace) in one hand.

He is seated on padmasana, his Vehicles are elephants, turtles and buffalo and sometimes a shole match (type of fish). Somewhere the idols of Masan Thakur is without a head. Instead, he has wide-open eyes in place of his belly, a jadarel mustache, a mouth with protruding teeth, holding a mace in his hand.

3. Origin myths of masan:

There is a brief history of the origin of this Demigod. There is a saying 'nana jone Nana mot' means different people have different opinions. From the secular point of view, There are many myths surrounding Masan. And these secular myths always differ from region to region. Some myths are:

1-According to myths prevalent in several parts of North Bengal, Ma Kali and Dharmaraja's child is named Masan. Dr. Charu Chandra Sanyal in his "The Rajbangshis of North Bengal " states this also.

2-There is another myth regarding the origin of masan.. Rajbangshi tribes says

Nachite nachite Kali aiyor/chuiya pore gham/tate sristhi hoilo/e jola masan.

Meaning:

Once in the month of Bhadra, Maa Kali was dancing in joy and she was sweating .And each drop of sweat that fell on the ground gave birth to masan.Some believe there are 16 or 18 or a total of 24 Masans were born.

3- Some consider Mashal to be the god of the sea because of his association with fish. Fishermen worship Mashaan. Mashan puja is performed at the beginning of the sea journey in the hope that natural disasters, various difficulties in fishing, proper marketing will end smoothly. If Mashaan is happy, there is no danger. All the fishermen of a fishing village came and appeared in Mashan Puja. Pooja is organized by the sea.

4- The image of a deity or deity called Pisach terrifying. According to folklorist Swapankumar Tagore, editor of Koulal magazine, "According to Hindu Buddhist mythology, ghouls are cannibals. According to the ghouls, they lived in the Kashmir region. Ghouls are cremation dwellers. Many call ghouls mashan gods. Ghosts accompany them. They are illusionists. The epitome of pure deity."

Many people are reluctant to call Mashan a deity and evil ,they call him 'baba'(father).

Mainly this god get pujas out of fear and well being of their family and lands as masan sometimes referred to as 'urbaratar Deb'.(god of fertility).very few worshiped with devotion .

4.Types of masan :

There are various form of masan in rural area all over the state.They have different names as per the purpose of origin.Dr. Girijashankar Roy Mahashay mentions 18 types of mashans in his "Puja- Parvana Book of the Rajvanshi Kshatriya Race in North Bengal".Namely – -

1) Barika Mashan – These Mashan live in the bamboo forest or jungle near the house and the people of the house.If you do something wrong, you rely on them.

2) Tisila mashan - Lives in water. If he finds someone alone in the afternoon or evening, he leans on him.

3) Ghatia Mashan – It shelters in river or pondghats and its nature is similar to Tisila Mashan.

4) Hunchiya Mashan — live in fields away from home. Crowds make pedestrians lonely in the evening or late at night.

5) Mash the invoice. • Lives in nearby trees. Attacks people when given a chance.

6) Bahita mashan —live on the banana trees that are washed away when rafts are damaged and if you accidentally touch or step on that banana tree, it fills you.

7) Kal Mashan – Lives in a crematorium. If you go to crematorium alone in the evening or late at night, crowd of people.

8) Kuhulia Mashan – This Mashan lives in trees and calls like kuhuli (cuckoo) and if answered to that call - there is danger to humans.

9) Nanga Mashan - Always naked. People die just seeing it.

10) Abhyaya Mashan – This Mashan does not live in any particular place. Pain in all

parts of the person when massed If you get it, fill it up.

11) Obua Mashan - No fixed place of residence. The patient only vomits on feeding. -

12) Shukna mashan - This mashan is thin. If the mass, the patient begins to get tired of the specific place of residence.

13) Bhula Mashan – People live in empty fields. It drives people in the wrong direction at night. -

14) Damsha Mashan - Lives in dense forests. Attacks people in houses surrounded by forest. ie active in a moist -- environment.

15) Angiya Mashan – ie Rangiya. It puts people in danger in various forms. fixed place of residence.

16) Trickery - putting people in danger in various places. No fixed place of residence.

17) Nyara Mashan - The head of this Mashan is shaved. Man's worst enemy. No fixed place of residence.

18) Kalir Mashan - Can live everywhere in the village. To harm humans - more than other.

In Coochbehar there are 16 types of masan. Some of the worshiped masans are: Muriya

Mashan, Jalua Mashan, Shukan Mashan, Also Shola Mashan in Darjeeling. More

mule bed mashan. And the masanas are found in the mantra. Cot mashan, pitcher

mashan. Chuchia Masan, Bishua Masan. Jaluka Mashan, Konkania Mashan, Hagura

Mashan, Tupa Mashan, Kalika Mashan, Pairi Mashan.

There is also a concept of masan possession on people. The affected person suddenly throws stones. From time to time the fire is lit. In the middle of the night, he was startled by a dream. If someone asks, mutter to yourself. Gradually his body starts to break down. Amasha, indigestion, and sleeplessness sometimes sit on him from being skinny. The patient's final outcome is death. So as soon as the mass rises, the patient has to be taken to the than or path (temple of Masan).

The Māsāns attack both male and female at any time of the day or night. The afflicted patient is brought to the path and placed on the left side in front of the idol. 5 vermilion drops are applied after wiping the ground of Thane. The materials of worship are — Unan terracotta placed on a banana leaf, clay . The materials of worship — unan terracotta placed on banana leaves, clay lamps, and of course shoal fish. In addition to this, an offering of atiya kala, a pair of pigeons, curd melted in a ghat, bhura bhura chira, fried rice, and two red nishans.

The mantra is : 'eso Kali boso chale kotha kou kornomule/Korner kotha korbe kou joto mitha mone khabi/korom korom dhorom dhoro satali porbot chalong/.norong loker nak chalong,Mora borta masan" .

5.Process of the puja':

The process of masan Puja is not the same as other pujas. In the method of Puja there is a touch of primitive thought, there is no specific mantra. Devotees worship masan with songs composed by the local people. They usually offers clay lamps, shoal fish, a pair of pigeons, eggs and curd with chira (rice flacs) as Prasad. They don't bend their heads and fold their hands as they normally do in front of other gods. Instead, when addressing Mashan-Baba, devotees clench their right fist, touch their forehead and extend that fist

towards the deity in a swift manner.

6.Reason of the worshipping:

There are different reasons for worshipping.people worship different kinds for different problems.most of the time they worship masan when someone is possessed or there is some problem in the village.we can see the temples near crematorium,middle of highways ,near some reservoir and in the village heart.The temple in highway get worshiped for protecting the passengers from accidents or any kind of mishappenings.And the village people show their devotion for the well being of their family and other living beings.They respect their god and believe that He will protect them as guardian.Masan can be worshiped in Saturday and Tuesday of any month of the year whenever there is some problem or a marriage ceremony or rice ceremony,they went to their god for blessings.This believe is prominent in rural areas far from the urbanization and less in municipality areas.

7.Notable temples of masan:

There are mainly 3 types of temples in the local areas of coochbehar.The biggest Mashan temple in Cooch Behar is in Gosanimari and Alokjhari area. The temple was constructed by the local Marwari trading community,after masan baba fulfilled their wishes and out of devotion they build the temple.There is an annual fair surrounding the temple compound on new year.



1.masan temple near small pond: Baladanga



2.An unadorned temple: baladanga,Dinhata



3.Masan temple in a middle of a highway: masankura,dinhata



4.The biggest masan temple in gosanimari(collected image)



5.The idol inside the gosanimari temple (collected).



6.Gorkata masan (headless masan)



8. masan painting:

Masan painting inspired by masan Thakur is one of the primitive art forms of bangal. It is one such unique art style that represents a unique and interesting section of Indian culture. The earlier forms of the Masan paintings are very similar to the famous Thangka paintings of Tibet, but as it came to the eastern region of the Indian subcontinent via the silk road and other trade routes, it grew into what could be called an Indianised form of Thangka paintings. Today, Masan paintings are primarily made in the North eastern regions of India, the epicenter of the craft being West Bengal. It is also widely made in Bangladesh.



masan painting



masan painting by Kavita Harkut

9. Earlier masan paintings and of idol

The early representations of the Masan deities were all in form of paintings on silk which was similar to Tibetan thangkas or paintings on cloth. They were said to have healing powers and the Masan paintings were often used for treatment.

Then for some various reasons silk route was closed in North Bengal. Then the 'malakar' (garland makers) communities of jalpaiguri, dinajpur, coochbehar started this painting on cork, 'sora' (plates made of mud) and in solas (a soft plant). They're proud of their heritage and they are doing it from generations with the use of handmade brushes

and natural pigments on shola motifs, which have special importance to Rajbangshi people.

The Masan paintings are vibrant and colourful. It usually have a bright red background that depicts an Indianised form of the ancient Tantric religion they have their origins in. As it is linked to tantric themes, it is not very pleasant looking. The red color of the paintings symbolizes the ferocity. There is a variety in the designs as there are many forms of masan being worshiped by the community.

10. **Present condition of masan Puja and masan chitrakala:**

This culture is disappearing due to the advancement of technology and the spread of education among the Rajvanshi tribals. There are very few people only among them who still practice the art form because they are willing to keep their indigenous art form alive.

Since the paintings are used on various religious and cultural occasions among the Rajbangshi people, the demand for the paintings is still present and they are sold in the markets.

10. **Initiative for preservation of this art form:**

There are small local artists who are practicing this art form. There is one prominent artist who has brought Masan paintings to the limelight not just in India, but in the world naming Madhusudan Das, who is the most popular artist of Masan paintings. He was awarded a scholarship by the ministry of Human Resources Development in the 1990s, also winning a gold medal in an All India Art Festival.

From the national level, he has advanced to the international level, having his artworks

exhibited in solo exhibitions in several cities across the world, including New York,

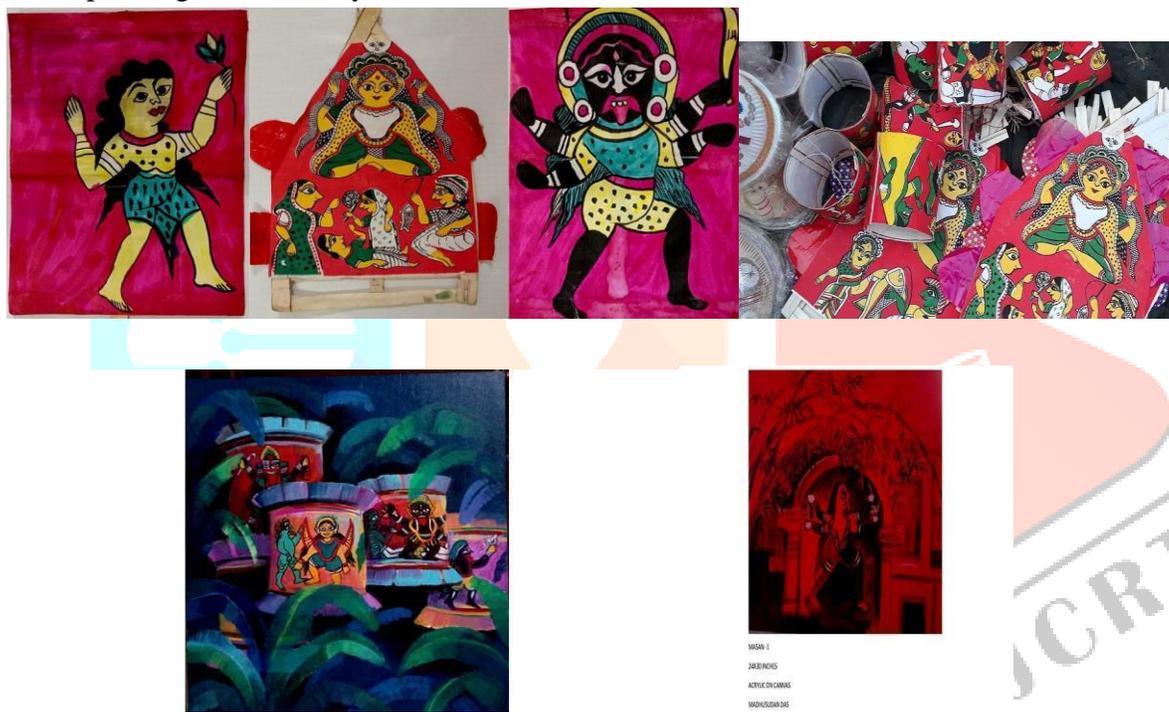
Singapore and London. Some of his exhibitions were entirely supported by the Indian

High Commission. He has helped immensely in preserving and popularizing this ancient

art form in this age of soulless .Inspired by him ,many of the young artists of the

The Rajbangshi community,also from the other tribes, started practicing this form.

Some paintings of masan by Madhusudan Das:



Conclusion:

Nowadays people are more interested in accepting the other culture and downplays their own culture. The young generation only pays attention to the culture and rituals which are celebrated on large scale and reluctant to carry on the culture their forefathers want to pass on. The same is going onto the younger generation of the Rajbangshis ,They like to accept the Bengali culture and western cultures.

Nevertheless the old generation are trying hard to carry on the rituals because

They believe in their indigenous culture as well as their traditional way of life. The older

the generation can't let go of their beliefs because tradition is rooted in them. And

the struggle is to maintain the age-old practices of their forefathers without turning away from the fruits of modernity. It is to see whether these small tribal cultural beliefs can survive the social metamorphosis taking place in the Rajbansi heartland of North Bengal.

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