



A review of religious tourism development: A study with special reference to Rash Mela / Rash Yatra of Nabadwip Town of Nadia District, West Bengal

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Abstract:

Rash Mela is the most celebrated festival in Nabadwip, Nadia district, West Bengal. The *Rash Mela* of Nabadwip is a famous festival celebrated thirty-five days after the autumnal Durga puja celebration or fifteen days after Kali puja in Kartik (Bengali calendar) Purnima. The most celebrated festival, *Rash Mela* of Nabadwip is flavoured by *Shakta Rash or Shakta Rasa or Shakta Ras*. The entire community of Nabadwip is eagerly waiting for *Rash Mela* all year. This festival is one of Nabadwip's major community-based events, or melas. Every year, thousands of people gather to celebrate in the hope of a new experience at the *Rash Mela*. This community-based festival captures the essence of a community's culture and heritage, while also promoting religious tourism in Nabadwip. Currently, tourism stands as the fastest-growing industry, focusing on the development of small-scale marketing perspectives. *Rash Mela* is a more than 500–600-year-old event known for preserving and showcasing the age-old barter system. The present study is an attempt to identify the different stakeholders in this mela and understand the major task areas of managing the religious festival.

Key words: *Rash Mela*, festivals, religious tourism, culture

Introduction:

Since the beginning of civilization, humans have always found occasions and scopes that give them absolute happiness and pleasure in their lives. These religious traditions and customs reflect an integral component of social growth and progression. Every religious culture inevitably consists of some events, festivals, and melas that denote the fabric of a community. Every community-based religious event or festival not only preserves the community's identity, but also promotes religious tourism all over the world. Simultaneously, modern small-scale business practices based on *Rash Mela* incorporate customary procedures. A number of new-generation books expressed different aspects of religious festivals, temple festivals, and custom festivals (Suri & Rao, 2014; Liang, Wang & Xu, 2016; Gurung, 2016; Ranga & Pradhan, 2017). It is well documented by a number of authors that the most probable reasons for the promotion and popularity of tourism in the local festival and mela are that it is encouraging for local event-based tourism (Paige & Littrel, 1995; Smith & Jenner, 1998; Jago, Chalip, Brown, Mules, & Ali, 2002; Felsenstein & Fleischer, 2003; Sharma, 2005; Shinde DB, 2011).

Objectives of the Study:

The main objectives of the study are to assess the tourism scenario of *Rash Mela* based on

Rash Puja and to analyse the different economic activities based on the mela of the study area. The study is based on primary data collected randomly with a structured questionnaire and secondary information from different government offices, i.e., Nabadwip Municipality Office, Nabadwip Police Station, Eastern Railway Office, and Nabadwip Bus Stand Office.

Study Area:

Nabadwip is a small, ancient, and heritage-rich town in West Bengal's Nadia district. This holy town is known as the Oxford of Bengal because of its age-old glory in education and knowledge. The study town is located next to the Ganges, also referred to as Bhagirathi.

Discussion:

Both the Vishnu Purana and the Bhagabat Purana mention Lord Sri Krishna's *Rash Mela*. On the full moon day, or Purnima, in the month of Kartick (Bengali), Ruler Krishna joined forces with Gopinis to perform a dance known as *Rasa* or *Rash Lila*. There are two sorts of culture distinguished at Nabadwip, i.e., Vaishnavism and Shaktivism. The Vaishnavas adhere to Vishnu, who is actually Brahman and manifests as Lord Rama, Lord Krishna, and other avatars.

Shaktivism is the veneration of the Hindu goddess *Shakti* (Sanskrit: “power” or “energy”). *Shaktivism* is, together with *Vaishnavism* and

Shaivism, one of the major shapes of modern Hinduism and is particularly well known in Bengal and Assam. Hindus respect all female gods for their diverse appearances and often refer to them as Devi (Goddess), such as Kali, Uma, Parvati, and Ambika. At Nabadwip, devotees of Shakti and Shiva, along with aficionados of Vaishnu, Rama, or Krishna, blend Shaktism with Vaishnavism. The *Rash Mela* is a representation of the coordination of *Vaisnavism*, *Shaktism*, and *Shaivism*. Many locations, including Boro Akhra, Shyamsundr Bari, Harisava Mandir, Jaganath Bari, Gorachander Akhra, Gourio Math, and Mahapravu Bari, hosted the Rash lila of the Vaishnava culture of Nabadwip.

King Krishna Chandra Roy of Nabadwip was the pioneer of the *Rash Mela* or *Rash Yatra* at Nabadwip. Others believe that the later generation of Maharaja Krishna Chandra, also known as Girish Chandra, introduced the Rash festival first. Nandakumar Bidyabhusan introduced Devi Gostho as the first Rash Puja of Nabadwip in 1836, and people still worship it today, according to some opinions. Another opinion is that Vriguram, who hails from Dacca with his family, is responsible for this *Rash Mela* or *Rash Yatra*. He lived at Dearapara. He set up a seat for Panchamundi Asan at Dearapara, and then the Court Pandit of Krishna Chandra, Shankarnath Tarkobagish, enshrined the Siva Linga and Goddess Kali.

The first Rash Yatra of Nabadwip took place on the day of Rash Purnima in 1752–1756, when people worshipped Aloknath (Siva) and Kali. Therefore, it seems that the introduction of the Rash Yatra of Nabadwip occurred between 1752 and 1756. The Rash Yatra of Nabadwip worships 242 government-enlisted and registered baroari, or club-made gods and goddesses, as well as thousands of unregistered idols of divine beings and goddesses (Nabadwip Municipality, 2018). Grish Chandra Basu, a famous daroga or officer in charge of Nabadwip-Shantipur-Krishnagar, has well documented this in his book "Sekaler Daroga Kahini." He composed: "*This Potpuja is very famous in Nabadwip. Though its name is Potpuja, but actually worshiping has done through making clay idol of various deity. Among them, Durga, Bindhyabasini, Kali, Jagadhatri, Annapurna were very famous.*"

The most important idol is the Baro Shyama of Tegharipara. In the southern part of the locality, there are other Shyama images (mejo shyama, sejo shyama, and chhoto shyama). Most notable is that Baro Shyama is the largest and oldest of the four Shyama sisters. Bhriguram, a member of Raj Purohit (i.e., King Krishana Chandra), was the first to worship this idol. Presently, it is under the supervision of a trustee board. The famous Naiyaik (rationalist and logician) Shankarnath Tarkabagish (1723–1820) introduced the idol Alane Kali,

worshipped on the seat of Panchamundi of Dearapara. Distinctive baroari clubs worship various types of pictures, images, and murtis. The most famous *murti* is the *Baro Shyama* of Tegharipara. The southern part of the study area is home to other Shyama images or murtis, such as Mejo Shyama, Sejo Shyama, and Chhoto Shyama. *Baro Shyama* is the most noteworthy in height, measurement, and she is the elder sister among the four sisters of Shyama.

The Potpuja festival involves worshipping the Ganga-Clay murti, which are symbols of various deities. Among them, Durga, Mahishmardini, Kali, Shiva, Jagadhatri, Annapurna, Kamalakamini, Vinhyabasini, Gouraangini, Bharat Mata, Annapurna, Krishna Kali, Mahaprabhu, Bhadra Kali, Debigusto, Chandi Mata, Radha-Krishna, Nabadurga, Brahma, and Bshinu are very famous. Unique types of thermocol or sola-made decorations, known as Daker Saj, beautifully adorn the large clay image, or murti. Light shines brightly on many pandals. The melodies of woodwind, Dhak, and banjos, as well as the rhythmic beat of drums and the melodious sound of mridangas, enliven the Nabadwip discourse. Everyone appreciates these sounds during the Mela festivities. This is a union or concert of individuals, not just from Nabadwip but from all across Bengal. In his book "Nabadwip Mahima," historian Kanti Chandra Rari wrote:

"Devi Bhagabati has been worshipped in different forms in Nabadwip during Ras Purnima. The next day, after puja, people from the nearest place came to watch the idols. Also, Maharaja of Nadia came to see, and he encouraged this festival by giving awards for making outstanding idols. For that purpose, the organising committee brought their idol to Porama Tala. There, Maharaj judges the structure of the idol, ornaments (called in Bengali as Saj), etc., and then decides the award to be the best one."

The most exciting aspect of the Rash Mela or Rash Yatra is when the baroari, or club members, travel to Poramatala carrying musical instruments and leading a procession after the worship concludes; this event is known as Navami. On the Bisarjan day, the next day of Rash Puja, large idols on carts traverse the town, encircling Poramatala Road through Radhabazar Park, Dandapanitala, Charichara Para, and Sarkar Para, accompanied by musical instruments and a procession known as Arang. In 1994, the Nabadwip police authority introduced this circular road procession. Another feature that began in 2000 is the rituals of "Ghat Bisarjan," which involve the immersion of Ghatas, or holy clay pots, taken from the Jagadhatri Puja of Krishnagar. Previously, the Arang or Procession ceremony featured music from Sanai, Dhak, and Dhol, drumbeats, and a variety of songs known as

Khemta and Kheur (Nadia Kahini). The organisers now plan to discontinue the old system by incorporating western bands and other musical instruments. The Vaishnavas now restrict the Rash Utsav to only their temples, whereas the Shakta Rash Yatra is gaining popularity among the people.

Currently, Nabadwip's religious tourism is associated with small-scale economic activity. One significant aspect of the Rash Mela is the generation of micro-income from temporary small retail shops and vendors selling puja materials, toys, food stalls, and traditional crafts. The growth in tourism activities in the study area is an income generating economic sector as well as creating temporary employment opportunities even for marginally poor people in society.

Conclusion

Rash Mela is a community-based festival that provides a unique experience, particularly in terms of representing old culture in a new arrangement for tourists who come from not only different parts of West Bengal but also other parts of the world. These events are religious by nature since they can be distinctly associated with a specific culture and tradition related to a geographical region. The Rash Mela contains immense benefits for different stakeholders. Rash Mela and festivals help to disseminate information, rituals, and knowledge about Nabadwip's cultural heritage. The local administration of Nabadwip creates an opportunity for adequate participation from different stakeholders. At present, the Ras Puja is transforming community participation in puja into a major state festival, followed by global recognition.

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