



FESTIVALS: THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF MURSHIDABAD DURING THE NAWAB REIGN

Mst Mehebuba Khatun

Research Scholar, Dpt. of History, Aliah University Kolkata

Email; mehebubaa@gmail.com Ph No : 7872013191

Abstract: Festival is one of the important elements of the culture of a society. Through the festival commemorate some important objective and spread the happiness and joy to the people. In the context of Murshidabad culture, festival has a heritage which made Murshidabad culture lively. The nature of festival of this district is much liberal where everyone can make their presence. Not only the nawabs and zamindars sometime wealthy persons also extend their patronage to the commencement of festival. In every festival no matter related with what religion had a unique feature that was meet, greet and gift. Distribution of food, clothes, money was a common thing in the festive season which bring the happiness to the needy people by overcome them from their distressed. The festival also played a crucial role in the society to lived people side by side for a long time by influencing and accepting each other's rituals and way of celebration. Some time it had showed in the eighteen century Murshidabad culture, the religious festival has changed its nature and accomplished with the elements of social needs.

Keywords: Murshidabad, Nawab, Festival, Culture, Eid, Durgotsav, Beravasan.

Festival is a celebration by a community centering a particular object, the object could be religious or social which embraced the culture of that society. In eighteen century Murshidabad was ruled by the Muslim Nawabs and the society was a complex conglomeration of several distinct caste, sect and religion. Festival generally the celebration of some particular event where people enjoyed that event with different kind of food and entertainment. In Murshidabad society we can found some sorts of religious festivals as well as social festival where people influenced one another's way of celebration and made the celebration completed by their presence. Bengal was being ruled by the Muslim rulers in medieval time and the society had a reputation for their religious consciousness. They used to have made lot of enjoyment during their religious festivals like *Eid*, *Sab-e-Barat* etc. and the financial abundance helped them to conduct the social functions in grand manner. It is

important to note that, the religious festivals of the Muslim society were being similar throughout the Muslim rule in Bengal and they included a number of new religious and social functions over the period¹. In Murshidabad society during the Nawabs reign there were two type of festivals, religious and social. The people of the society were celebrated the religious festivals with full of dedication on their own and they participated spontaneously in social festivals irrespective of caste, class, religion etc.

Murshidabad society during the Nawabi reign was served as the mixture of various religion and its different caste like as Hindu, Muslim, Persian, Christian, Vaishnava, Buddhist, Jain etc. but Hindu and Muslim were the dominant religion. According to the historian Sushil Choudhury, Murshidabad was a cosmopolitan city². In the society there was no restriction for embraced their own religion, that's why the eighteen

century of Murshidabad culture experienced all sorts of religious festivals and it had also been adopted some new festivals as the symbol of unity in diversity nature of the society and celebrated these as the common social festivals where common people could make their presence. Through this paper try to find out and describes the various religious and social festivals which were took place in the said period.

Murshidabad was ruled by the Muslim Nawabs in eighteen century and they were extended their enthusiastic patronage to the religious festivals of *Islam*. *Eid* was the first and foremost festival in *Islam*. The ruling class and the larger portion of Murshidabad society was dominated by Muslim community so the festivals which related to *Islam* was celebrated lavishly during the eighteen century Murshidabad. *Eid-ul-fitar* and *Eid-ul-Adha* this two is the biggest festival of Murshidabad in Muslim community. After the compilation of one month fast (*ramazan*) the Muslims celebrated the *Eid-ul-Fitar* and they welcomed the new moon of *Eid* with much fanfare manner. On the day of *Eid*, all Muslims were full of joy and men, women, boys and girls all wore the fine attires and all the boys went to the *Eidgah* (field of prayer) for *Namaz*. We got a detailed description of the excitement of *Eid-ul-Fitar* at Murshidabad in Mirza Nathan's work, immediate after appearing of new moon on the evening sky at the eve of *Eid*, the royal *nakkara* were beaten and cannons were fired continuously from all the gun of *golandaj* army. At the end of the night, the cannon fire ceases and is followed by the sound of heavy

artillery was like an earthquake³. Nawab, najim, nobel, wealthy people were used to donate large sum of money, gifts, alms to the poor when they marched towards *Eidgah maidan* or prayer place. The author of '*Naubahar-i-Murshid Quli Khani*', Azad Hossain Bilgrami mention the description of gifting on the way to *Eidgah*, he said when the assistant ruler of Dhaka under nawab Shujauddin Khan went on a procession towards *Eidgah maidan*, a large amount of money would be spread about a mile from the fort⁴.

According to Ghulam Hussain Tabatabai, the day was full of happiness and excitement on this festival, everyone used to dress up in best clothes. He also mentioned that, nephew and son-in-law of Alivardi Khan, Nawajis Mohammad Khan mourns the death of his beloved on the day of *Eid-ul-Adha*. Nawab tried him to dress up in new clothes and gave the women and begums the appropriate attire for the festival⁵. Celebration of *Eid-ul-Adha* as a source of sacrifice, originated to the time of prophet Ibrahim. After returning home from *Eidgah* according to their means they sacrificed animal like cow, goat, buffalo, camel etc. and distributed the meat to the poor, family, friend and neighbors. After the *namaz*, money clothes etc. was being gifted for the help of poor and needy people which helped them to get over their distressed. According to Mirza Nathan, after the sacrifice a great feast had been arranged with lot of entertainment, beautiful and talented dancers and singers were called for the performance. He also noted that the friend, family, relatives and royal

servants visit each other's place, greet and gift each other on the occasion of *Eid*. Commander Shajat Khan organized a social event to entertain his friends on this joyous festival⁶.

Eid-i-Milad-u-Nabi that is the birth anniversary of prophet Mohammad (SW) was celebrated at Murshidabad in great manner which can be obtained from the example of the observance of the day by nawab Murshid Quli Khan. He made this day as great festival and rejoicing. During the first twelve days of the month of *Rabiul Awal*, he used to greet the people personally and does hospitality to the poor. On this occasion he had decorated the entire Murshidabad city with lightening up the bank of Bhagirathi river. *Quranic* verse and mosque, floral design, tress, fruits etc. were being showed at illumination place and this celebration was continued for twelve days. On the occasion of the birthday of prophet, mehfil or discussion session had been held where his life was explained among the ruling and elite Muslims and giving gifts to the pious and learned people, fasting and exchanging greetings among Muslims was made⁷.

The festival of *Muharram* is closely associated with the *Shia* sect of Muslim community on the first ten days of the *Muharram* month to commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hassan Hussain. Murshidabad Nawabs were belong to the *Shia* caste in *Islam* and the *Shia* population had also been increased during the nawab reign in Murshidabad, as a result the capital city and place like Hooghly and Jahangirnagar became important for *Shia* culture. The existence of *Imambara* at Murshidabad, Hooghly

and Dhaka provide the celebration of *Muharram* festival during the said period⁸. The festive aura has been flown out immediate after getting moon on the sky in Murshidabad. At the *Nawabat Khana* of *Imambara* the sound of *Nawabat* has been played and candles were lit on the wall of *Imambara*. On the fourth day of *Muharram* people was started to gather at *Imambari* to listen *Marsia* song (mourning song). On the seventh day, the *Imambari* were lit up with candles and next day women were gathered there at afternoon to perform mourning songs. On the ninth day, a procession had come out at night and arranged an exhibition of stick play that was prepared by the guru of *Akhara*. The last or tenth day is called as *Ashura* when after visiting the different city *Taziyas* (flags) were thrown into the water and they ended their festival. The *Sunni* sect of Muslim community observed this day by showed the sympathy of the soldiers of Eazid towards Hussain at afternoon and took the holy body of Hussain at night to bury and lastly, they ended up the *Muharram* by placed the *Taziya* in water⁹.

However, *Eid-ul-Fitar*, *Eid-ul-Adha*, *Muharram* were the main festival of Muslim community in Murshidabad society in eighteen century but there also celebrated some social customs which was added the extra festive mood in the society. *Sab-e-Barat* has been celebrated among the Muslim community in fifteen days before to the starting of *Ramajan* or on fourteenth day of month of *Shaban*, was a time of prayer and feast. The Muslims of subcontinent organize many rituals and entertainments on this

occasion and celebrate it with great pomp. According to 'Baharistan-e-Ghaybi', there is a reference of celebration of it¹⁰. Nawabs of Bengal were used to celebrate it in grand manner, decorate the houses with light, men and women offered prayer throughout night, goods were distributed, firework display was held¹¹. Some scholar compared it with the *Shivaratri* of Hindu¹². *Aqeeqah* is an absolutely necessary ceremony after the birth of child in Muslim *Akida* (belief). Actually, it's a naming ceremony of the child where two buffaloes and goats are slaughtered for male child and one for female child and meat has been distributed among the relatives and neighbors. *Bismillahkhani* also celebrated in Murshidabad society during Nawab reign. It was a ceremony observed when a child has started their schooling at the age of four year four month and four days to seeking the blessings to the others. Hindu also celebrated this function for their child. *Khatna* is an officially religious ceremony celebrated with feasts and gifts, there cutting of the skin of penis is called *khatna*¹³. *Kul-khatam* the ceremony happened after death is a social custom in Muslim community of Murshidabad society.

Mursidabad society was a Hindu majority *Suba* in eighteen century. Though the ruler was Muslim but there were lot of Hindu zamindars and nobel who embraced their own religion and religious rituals and extended their patronage to the festivals. The Durga puja was one of the most important and great festival held among the Hindu community of Murshidabad district during eighteen

century. People worshiped the goddess *Durga* who is the symbol of women power, she had destroyed the *Ashur* (devil). Poet Gangaram has mentioned about the worship of mother goddess *Durga* in his work '*Maharashtra-puran*'. According to *Maharashtra-puran*, in 1741 A.D Maratha chief Bhaskar pandit invade Bengal Suba and plundering the house, temple etc. and looted the money during the reign of Alivardi Khan. This was the month of *Ashwin* of Bengali calendar where the aura of *Durgotsav* had been floated in the air of Bengal, Bhaskar pandit also got the influence of it and organized the *Durgotsav*. He invited all the landowners, made the arrangement and started the celebration with grand fanfare. After performing the puja on the day of *Saptami* and *Ashtami*, he left the statue and fled away for attacking of Nawabs soldiers Saptami ashtami dui puja kori.

Bhaskar palaye jay
protima chhari
Mistanno samogri joto
chhilo kachhe
Bohonia lutite lagilo tar
pachhe¹⁴.

The goddess *Kali* also being worshiped in Murshidabad society that was another important festival among the Hindus. The goddess *Kali* was highly worshiped by the people who were related with plundering, robbery and murder and sacrificed the animal. Raja Krishna Chandra had started the celebration of goddess *Kali* worshipping. Contemporary *Shakta* saint poet Ramaprasada has mentioned about the worshipping of mother *kali* and he condemned the empty rituals what was practices in the society.....

Jank jomoke korle puja

Ohonkar hoi mone mone
Tumi lukiye take korbe puja
Janbe na re jonogone
Dhatu pasan matir murti
Kaj ki re tor se gothone
Tumi monomoi protima kori
Bosao hridi-podmasone¹⁵.

Buffalos, goats, sheep were being slaughter on the name of mother *kali*. It was like the *Eid-ul-Adha* festival of Muslim where they also sacrifice the animal and distributed the meat to the others.

Mesh, chhagol, mahishadi kaj kire tor
bolidane
Tumi 'joi kali' 'joi kali' bole boli deo
shodoripugone
Prosad bole, dhak, dhol kaj kire tor se
bajone
Tumi 'joi kali' boli deo korotali, mon
rakhi tar shree chorone¹⁶.

Deepawali was celebrated in the society on occasion of *Kali Puja*. *Deepawali* festival was for the Hindu community but in eighteen century Murshidabad society, Muslims also observed it and Nawabs had celebrated and patronaged it, it was a festival of light.

During this period, a large section of Hindu worshipped the god *Shiva*, specially the lower class of people worshiped him and at the time of difficulties they took shelter of *Shiva*. On the day of *Shivaratri* in the month of *Chaitra* in Bengali calendar *Shiva Puja* took the shape of a grand festival which also known as *Gajan* festival, where people celebrated it with songs, dance and feast. *Shiva Puja*, *Gajan*, *Charak* were became the national festival for common people of society¹⁷. Tribal and Santhals were the biggest part of Hindus in Bengal and the religious life of upper class Hindus

was different from tribal like *Bagdi*, *Bauri*, *Hari*, *Dom* etc. Tribal worshiped *Shiva*, *Vishnu*, *Dharmaraj*, *Durga* along with many of their won god like *Manasa*, *Bhadu*, *Mansingh*, *Bara Pahari*, *Shitala*, *Kudrasini* etc. They performed various rituals and sacrifices the goat, hen, cow for deities and made it festival enjoying with song, dance and drink.

Namkaran ceremony (ceremony for naming the new born) and *Annaprasan* (rice ceremony of child) also the important functions which celebrated in grand manner. Sometime Muslims also took part of this celebration and made it the social festival rather religious one. One of the most important social festival of Murshidabad society during the said period was the *Bera* festival. The *Bera* festival was being started by the first nawab of Bengal Murshid Quli Khan. The festival was started on the shake of Khwaja Khijir Pir, the objective of this festival was to prevent the accident on boat into the water in the last Thursday of the month of *Bhadra*. The later Nawabs also extended their enthusiastic patronage for this *Bera Bhasan*. In a painting during the nawab Murshid Quli Khan has picturized the glamour of the festival. In the picture the whole palace and Bhagirathi river was full of decorated boats and *bajras* with lights, tubri, hawai are lit with fireworks, the scene was from a festive day (*Beravasan*)¹⁸. Murshid Quli Khan constructed a big boat and built a house and mosque with paper on it. Beautifully decorated and illuminated boat floated down into the water of Bhagirathi river with firework was visible from the miles away, the common people took part of it. Nawab

arranged the food for his subjects. Dr. Waiz has described the glance of festival during Siraj-ud-daula's time, the nawab himself enjoyed the festival by floating hundreds of boats into the water of Bhagirathi river and the large number of people gathered across the bank of river¹⁹.

The living side by side for a long time Hindu and Muslim undoubtedly both influenced each other's religious, cultural and social life. Azimushshan the governor of Bengal had worn the clothes of Hindus and took part of the *Holi* or *Dol* festival. Alivardi Khan's son-in-law Nawajis Mohammad Khan, Sayed Ahmed and grandson Siraj were used to take part in the *Holi* festival. Nawab Siraj-ud-Daula had celebrated *Holi* at his palace after returning from victory of Calcutta¹⁹. The *Dol* festival of capital city Murshidabad has described by Karam Ali in his work '*Mujaffarnama*', where celebration had been continued for seven days. In everyday morning the festival was started by dance performance of five hundred beautiful women, colored water flowed through the fountain of royal garden and everyone played with abeer²¹. There was various *mela* (fair) held which spread the festive environment in the society. Darpanarayana had started the *Kiritswari mela* at Kiritswari temple at Kritkona village on every Tuesday of *Pous* month in Bengali calendar²².

Thus, the Murshidabad society was conglomerated with different religion who followed the different belief but for long time togetherness made them respectful to each other's belief, rituals, festivals etc. which fulfil the festive season and increased the

closeness among the people of society by celebrating every event together. *Muharram*, *Bera*, *Bishmillahkhani*, *Basanta Utsab* or *Holi*, *Namkaran*, marriage etc. were being celebrated in grand style with each other's participation and turned the religious festivals into social festivals, where everybody could take part irrespective of caste and religion. In every festival of Murshidabad in eighteen century had a unique nature that was gift and greet. Wealthy people and Nawabs distributed money, material etc. as the gift of festival which bring the happiness to the needy one. Every festival brings the joy and happiness to the people and made them close without restriction. Hindu used to worship Muslim saint, dedicate the *Sinni* to them and also prayed to them for their livelihood, where Muslims started to worship *Pir*, *Darvhes*, and *Sufis* by the influence of each other's rituals. Vaishnavism also flourished this time in Murshidabad, Telia Budhuri, Saidabad, Bhogowangola were the center for *Sohojia* Vaishnava sect. Vaishnava kirtan also take place in the festive history in eighteen century Murshidabad. Jain, Buddhist, Persian, Armenian also were the part of society but there are no such evidences of their religious festival, but the existence of Jain temple, Armenian church, Christian cemetery etc. seems that they had also been embraced their own religious festival in the eighteen century liberal society of Murshidabad.

References:

1. Rahim, Dr. Abdur, *Banglar Samajik o Sanskritik Itihas*. Vol-II, Bangla Academy, Calcutta, 1996, p-195.

2. Choudhury, Sushil, *Profile of a Forgotten Capital, Murshidabad in Eighteen Century*, Manohar publication, Calcutta, 2018, p-124.
3. Nathan, Mirza, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi*, tr. Dr. M. I. Borah, vol-I, Assam, 1936, p-110.
4. Sarkar, Jadunath, *The History of Bengal, vol-ii*, Dhaka, 1948, p-8.
5. Tabatabai, Ghulam Hossain, *Siyar-ul-Mutakherin*, vol-II, London, 1926, p-119.
6. Nathan, Mirza, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi*, tr. Dr. M. I. Borah, vol-II, Assam, 1936, pp-742/170.
7. Rahim, loc. cit., P-197.
8. Dhani, E. H., *Muslim Inscriptions in Bengal*, Dhaka, 1957, pp-90/95.
9. Ibid, p-95.
10. Nathan, loc. cit., p-101.
11. Rahim, loc. cit., P-198.
12. Ashraf, K. M., *Life and Conditions of the People of Hindustan*, Delhi, 1959, p-205.
13. Rahim, Dr. Abdur, *Banglar Samajik o Sanskritik Itihas*. Vol-I. Calcutta, Bangla Academy, 1996, p-205.
14. Gangaram, *Maharashtra Puran*, internet archive, vol-I, p-232.
15. Dasgupta, Sashibhusan, *Bharater Shakti Shadhana o Shakta Sahitya* (Bengali), Calcutta, 1367BS.
16. Sen, Dinesh Chandra, *History of Bengali Language and Literature*, Calcutta, 1911, p-717.
17. Hunter, William Wilson, *The Annals of Rural Bengal*, vol-I, London, 1897, p-99-133.
18. Skeleton, Robert, *Arts of Bengal: The Heritage of Bangladesh and Eastern India*, London, 1979.
19. J. Waiz, *Notes on the Races and Customs of East Bengal*, London, 1883, p-12.
20. Karim, K. M., *Social Structures under the Nawabs*, p-40.
21. Ali, Karam, *Mujaffarnama, Bengal Nawabs*, Asiatic society, Calcutta, 1952, pp-49/50.
22. Roy, Nikhil Nath, *Murshidabader Kahini*, Puthipatra publisher, Kolkata, 1309, p-45.