

## Culture of West Bengal

By

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### Abstract

West Bengal, one of the eight states of India, where tropic of cancer passes. The state, which enjoys the Gangetic plains in the south and sub-Himalayan and Himalayan area in the north. The sub-Himalayan tract, known as the West Bengal Duars, is a part of the Tarai lowland belt between the Himalayas and the plain. The culture of West Bengal is one of the richest in India, it would not be an exaggeration to call it a land of diversity, be it dance, music, literature, cuisine, festivals or historic monuments. Over the years, the culture of West Bengal has emerged as the perfect blend of modernity and traditions.

### Keywords

West Bengal, Attire, Literature, Music, dance, Festival

### Traditional Attire of West Bengal

The rich tradition of West Bengal is reflected in the attire of the locals. During old times, men in Bengal used to wear free flowing cotton Panjabi generally of white colour along with white Dhuti, with a special Bengali knot in front known as “Geele”.



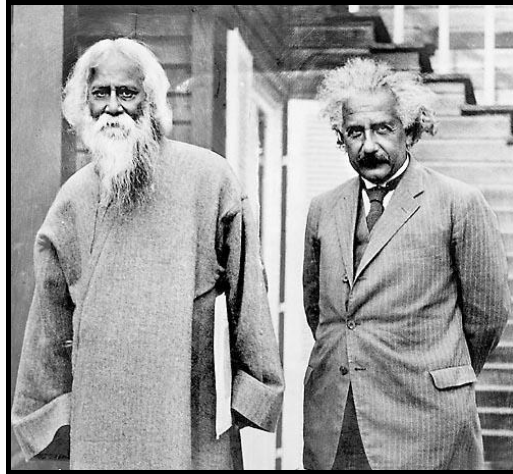
**Image 1: Traditional Attire**

Women were allowed to wear only saris during those times. These saris were in general of cotton material and were worn in a special Bengali fashion with a front Aanchal. Some of the traditional ornaments of the region are 'Kaan' a form of earring made of thin sheets of gold or silver which covers the entire ear, 'Choker of Chik' a fitted jewellery band of gold carvings worn around the neck, 'Tikli' an ornament for the forehead which is generally worn during one's marriage, 'Ratanchur' a bangle attached to five strings which go along five fingers and are attached to 5 rings generally made of gold or diamond and 'Sapta Lahiri' a necklace made of five strands of precious metals along with beads. Silver Filigree work of Maukhali region of Bengal, Mantasha made of precious stones and Kundan set jewellerys are also popular among the ladies of West Bengal. Hansuli, Baju, Tabiz and Tagaa are some of the traditional ornaments generally worn by the village ladies of both Hindu and Muslim origin.

### **Literary Culture of West Bengal**

Literature of Bengal can be divided into Medieval period (1360-1800 AD) and Modern period (after 1800 AD). During the medieval period, Bengali literature was mostly based on the life time of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu as Bengal was under the influence of 'Gauriya Vaishnavism'. The literature period can be timelined into three stages, Early Chaitanya Era, Chaitnya Era, and Later Middle Age.

The most distinct writer of Bengali literature is Rabindranath Tagore, who is considered as the Bengali polymath who had reshaped the culture of Bengal. He was the first non-European and the first Asian to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913 for his versatile literary work of 157 poems in the book 'Gitanjali'. He was simultaneously a poet, short story writer, song composer, playwright, novelist, essayist and painter. The national anthem of both India 'Jana Gana Mana' and Bangladesh 'Amar Shonar Bangla' are his composition. Affectionately called as 'Kabiguru' or 'Gurudev', Tagore is considered as the father of Bengali literature.



**Image 2: Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore with Sir Albert Einstein**

### **Music of West Bengal**

- **Rabindra Sangeet-** A form of music based on the songs written by the great poet Rabindranath Tagore, is the most renowned form of Bengali music.
- **Bishnupur Gharana-** based on the ancient Hindustani classical music, originated by the court musicians of Malla kingdom which existed in the Bishnupur and Bankura district. Ramesh Bandhopadhyay, Gyanchandra Prasad Goswami and Amiya Bandhopadhyay are few of the prominent musicians of this gharana.
- **Folk or Country Music-** The forms are Baul, Sari and Bhatiali songs. These songs were primarily composed and sung by the wandering tribes, boatmen and fishermen who composed songs of spiritualism and eternal philosophy.
- **Shyama Sangeet-** A genre of devotional music dedicated to Devi Kali or Shyama, who is another form of Goddess Durga.
- **Kirtan-** Another style of devotional Bengali music written on the early life of Lord Krishna. These are written by Vaishnavi poets and are a part of Dhrupad music. Tanpura and Khol are some of the main instruments required to sing Kirtan.
- **Nazrul Geeti-** These are songs written by the eminent poet Kazi Nazrul Islam.
- **Dwijendrageeti-** These are based on songs written by Dwijendralal Ray.
- **Probhat Shongit-** composed by Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar, who used a combination of eight different languages in his songs.

- **Atulprasadi**- These are the compositions of Atul Prasad Sen. The Atulprasadi songs are typically patriotic ones and are sung in the 'Thumri' style.
- **Adhunik Genre**- Also known as modern songs. These songs are still in vogue and there are many sub genres of this form like-
  - **Jeevanmukhi Gaan**- based on topics like the life of a common man, the daily struggle he faces, the relationships he or she shares etc. Dr. Bhupen Hazarika pioneered this type of music followed by singers like Suman, Nachiketa, Anjan Dutt, Shilajit Majumdar and many more.
  - **Bengali Rock Music**- During 1990s West Bengal started getting influenced by the rock music and fusion of the Western culture. Currently a lot of 'Bangla Bands' are present in the state who create music on variety of international genres like, Pop, Rock, Hard Rock, Grunge and Heavy Metal.

### Traditional Dance Forms of West Bengal

Dance was a popular art form during those times when ladies and gents were trained in various 'Natysastra'. Dance in Bengal have grown over time and two specific categories can be observed, the traditional form and the modern form. The traditional forms include variety of classical, modern and ancient tribal dance types.

- **Gaudiya Nritya**- A form of Bengali classical dance form. This form originated during the rule of the Palas over Bengal in the 12th century A.D, when Gaur was the capital of the region.



**Image 3: Gaudiya Nritya**

- **Raibense Dance**- An ancient dance form of the Burdwan and Birbhum district, which are based on martial art techniques. This is a dynamic form of art where dancers have to hop, jump in circles while carrying Shield, Spear and Trishul in their hand.



**Image 4: Raibense Dance**

- **Chhau Dance**- A form of tribal martial dance which is immensely popular in Purulia and Jhargram of West Midnapore District of West Bengal. The specialty of this dance is the costume which is of a grand stature and is made by the villagers of the Charida village of Purulia. Based on this dance form a festival occurs during March or April, known as the Sun Festival, where tourists come from various parts of the World.



**Image 5: Chhau Dance**

- **Modern Dance**- Originated with the start of 'Rabindra Nritya' where performances are done on Rabindra Sangeet written by Tagore.

- **Tribal Dance Varieties**

- **Jhumur Dance of Purulia** and its surrounding region is a specialized type of folk tribal dance, where girls hold each other by their waist and dance in one line. Boys play instruments like Dhol and Madol along with it.
- **Santhali Tribal Dance** of Bankura and Birbhum districts is a local tribal dance of the Santhals. The costumes worn during performances by both male and female are of vibrant colours. Men wear Dhoti with Turban and paint their body with different motifs. Female dancers use natural makeup with flowers and leaves.
- **Nepali Folk Dance**- This dance is a combination of singing and dancing, with the main theme generally being folklores of various Hindu and Buddhist Gods and Goddesses.
- Baul dance
- Chhokra dance
- Fakir dance
- Gambhira dance
- Jari dance
- Puppet dance (Putul Naach)



### **Handloom**

- **Tangail and Jamdani** are the two forms of handloom sarees exclusively made in the state.
- **Silk Sarees**- The Baluchari Sarees of Bishnupur and Murshidabad Silk Sarees are some of the fashionable sarees produced in India.

## Theatre and Films

- **Jatra**- Folk drama known as Jatra, is a long-standing tradition in West Bengal. This type of theater is a musical drama that uses song to tell a story while performing it on stage.
- **Tollywood**- Based in the Tollygunge area of West Bengal, the film industry in the state is known as “Tollywood” in West Bengal. It features a broad roster of well-known directors from throughout the world and the United States, including Satyajit Ray, the winner of the Academy Award for Best Film.

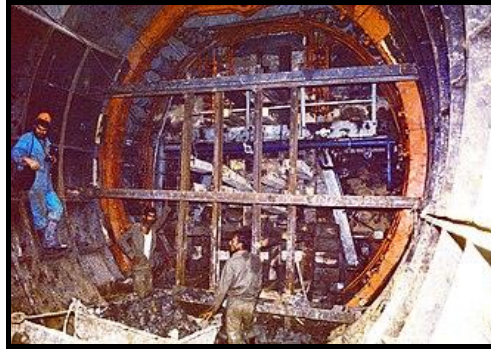
## Transport

- Kolkata, only city to have tram network.



**Image 6: Kolkata Tram**

- Kolkata was also the first city in South Asia to have an underground railway system that started operating from 1984. It is considered to have the status of a zonal railway.



**Image 7: Metro Tunnel Construction**

- The metered-cabs are mostly of the brand Ambassador. These taxis are painted with yellow colour, symbolising the transport tradition of Kolkata.



**Image 8: Ambassador Car**

## Cuisine and Sweets

Bengali sweets are generally made of ‘Chenna’ or sweetened cottage cheese with flour and specific pulses, which make the taste different from the north Indian sweets.

- Shondesh, Rasagolla, Roshomalai, Chum Chum, Mishti Doi, Rajbhog, Pantua and Kheer Kodombo are some of popular sweets of Bengal which have become world renowned.





**Image 9: Shondesh**

- Various forms of ‘Pithe’ and ‘Puli’ are specialised sweets of the winter and they are mostly made using rice flour, coconut, jaggery and milk.
- **Main Course-** the staple food is rice and fresh water fish. Rohu, Hilsa, Pabda, Koi, Tengada, Magur, Shingi, Parshe and Katla are some of the commonly eaten fishes of the region. ‘Luchi’, ‘Porota’ and ‘Atta Roti’ are some of the wheat-based foods which are made plain, as well as stuffed. Chicken, Goat and Lamb are also consumed and mustard oil is used for their cooking. Some of the popular traditional dishes of West Bengal are, ‘Ilish Mach Bhape’, ‘Shukto’, ‘Panch Mishali Charchori’, ‘Alu Posto’, ‘Mochar Ghonto’ etc.



**Image 10: Bengali Fish Curry**

## Festivals

Bengali year starts with the ‘Nabo Borsho’ or the Bengali New Year in the month of April, when the businessmen and shop owners welcome the Baishakh and start their new year financials.

- **Dol Punima or Holi** is another festival, during which the town Shantiniketan celebrates a colourful ‘Vasant Utsav’, drawing culturally inclined tourists from around the world.
- **Durga Puja-** The main festival of Bengal, which takes place in the month of September – October, to celebrate the homecoming of Goddess Durga to her father’s home on earth with her children, for her annual vacation. This is a 10-day event that sees the entire state decked up in the festive fervor.



**Image 11: Sindur Khela in Durga Puja**

- Rath Jatra, Janmashtami, Rakhi Purnima, Shivratri, Kalpataru Utsab and Jhulan Yatra- some of the most celebrated festivals of West Bengal.

## Conclusion

The state of West Bengal has been on the fore front of India’s cultural heritage. The capital city of Kolkata is also widely acknowledged as the “Cultural Capital of India”.

## References

Various source on internet

## About the Author

Dr. Suboohi Jafar is a Consultant, Department of Radiation Oncology, Apex Super-specialty Hospital and Post Graduate Institute, Varanasi. She is an erudite poet and prolific writer who has contributed to many national and international anthologies and won many awards.

