



MASALĀ MELĀ: AN INTERFACE BETWEEN TRADITIONAL AND MODERN MELĀ IN WEST BENGAL

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

This article examines West Bengal's non-religious fair, the Masalā melā of Gobardanga, which acts as a vibrant bridge between traditional and contemporary culture. Masalā melā is a unique cultural space in the rural fair landscape because, in contrast to traditional religious festivals, it serves as a secular community gathering focused on the themes of culinary heritage, local entrepreneurship, and artisanal craft. The socio-economic and cultural aspects of the fair are examined using a qualitative case study method that includes participant observation, interviews, and field surveys. The mela served as a microeconomic engine for informal livelihoods, as evidenced by the data showing that 468 vendors operated 229 stalls, earning ₹985,000, and 37 artisans engaged in craft-related trade made ₹58,600. The analysis also emphasises how Masalā melā promotes cultural fusion, allowing traditional folk elements to coexist with contemporary consumer trends and entertainment in the urban style. Furthermore, the paper argues on the potential of Masalā melā to redefine the social function of melas in rural Bengal. It bases this claim on existing literature and field data.

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1. Introduction

Fairs and festivals are determining markers of cultural identity, social encounter, and economic transaction in India, well embedded in the national and regional culture (Elias, 2006). While most Indian fairs are religiously associated or geographically situated with reference to sacred sites (Bhardwaj, 1973), the emergence of non-religious fairs indicates a new cultural trend. The Masalā melā of Gobardanga, West Bengal, is a pathfinder of such a development, being the first non-religious fair of the state that incorporates traditional cultural sensibilities and modern values. Organized not around a temple or a sacred day but as a reflection of local taste, culinary art, and community entrepreneurship, Masalā melā has become an empowered cultural space where music, food, performance, and technology are intertwined. It creates a dynamic public space where different identities and generations mingle. In contrast to traditional melas which are sustained on religious sentiments and rituals, this mela becomes an arena of participatory cultural expression, where both the heritage of folk practice and the imperatives of urban modernity are witnessed (Dey, 2023).

2. Literature Review

In West Bengal, fairs have long been thriving sociocultural events with roots in seasonal cycles and religious tradition (Bhandary et al., 2023). The majority of these fairs, like the Ganga Sagar Mela, Poush Mela, and Jhapan Mela, are firmly rooted in the sacred calendar of rural Bengal because they are held in connection with religious pilgrimages, folk deities, or harvest ceremonies. In addition to being places of worship, these fairs serve as commercial hubs where farmers, traders, and rural artisans come together to trade goods and services (Mosely, 2012). These melas' sensory diversity, which includes religious icons, folk performances, devotional songs, and handcrafted crafts, highlights their function as dynamic archives of oral traditions and local folklore (Samdarshi et al., 2020). According to academics, these fairs serve as platforms.

The evolution of traditional fairs in the face of modernity, commercialisation, and digital culture has drawn more scholarly attention in recent years (Çalışkan, 2018). Researchers have shown that the thematic focus of some fairs has clearly changed from primarily religious narratives to more diverse, inclusive experiences that appeal to a larger and frequently younger audience. Urbanisation, better infrastructure, and media coverage have changed the way fairs are planned and attended; in addition to

traditional features, many now include digital ticketing, stage shows, and celebrity appearances (Rydell, 1993). Fairs are being reinvented as venues for cultural diplomacy and lifestyle branding, as evidenced by the emergence of non-religious or hybrid melas like food festivals, book fairs, and music carnivals (Yang et al., 2020). The fair repositions itself as a cultural festival rather than a religious event, as evidenced by the use of social media hashtags to mobilise local youth, the presence of digital influencers, and online streaming of cooking competitions. The fair's structure supports its status as a hybrid, inclusive, and changing cultural phenomenon by allowing for a variety of participation methods, from younger participants using digital platforms to older artisans maintaining traditional recipes (Uro-Chukwu, 2024). By doing this, Masalā melā not only keeps aspects of traditional fairs alive but also reworks them in a way that speaks to media logic, community identity, and modern cultural politics.

3. Objectives

- I. To uncover the economic dependency of the vendors in Masalā melā
- II. To explore the economic dependency of the artisans in Masalā melā

4. Methodology

In order to investigate the Masalā melā in Gobardanga and its function as a nonreligious fair that combines traditional and modern elements, this study used a qualitative case study methodology. Surveys, interviews, and participant observation were all used in the fieldwork that was done during the 2024 Mela (Fig. 1). Structured questionnaires with vendors and craftspeople were used to collect primary data on stall counts, product categories, and revenue. A total of 37 artisan participants and 229 vendor stalls were recorded. Additionally, 20 stakeholders – including vendors, event planners, and guests – were interviewed in a semi-structured manner to learn more about their perspectives and experiences. Throughout the mela, performances, market interactions, and spatial arrangements were recorded through participant observation. Thematic analysis was used to examine the gathered data. To evaluate economic outcomes like total vendor income, type of participation, and occupational diversity, survey data was manually quantified. Key themes pertaining to cultural hybridity, non-religious identity, community interaction, and the informal economy were identified through the coding of field notes and interview transcripts. This made it possible for the study to track how various stakeholders used the mela's framework to traverse the traditional-modern interface.

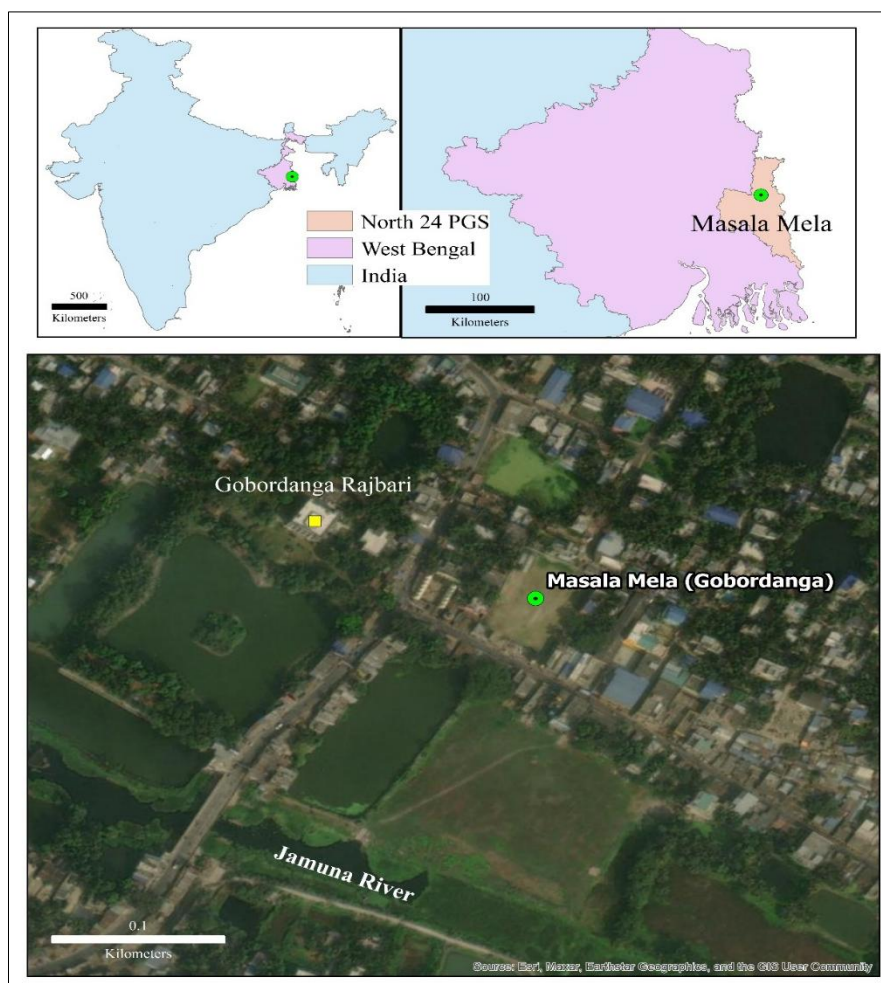


Figure 1: Masala Mela, Gobardanga, West Bengal, India

5. Result and Discussion

5.1. Farmers as Vendors

In addition to showcasing cultural vibrancy, Gobardanga's Masalā melā serves as a major economic centre for a variety of vendors, whose combined activity reflects the health of the unorganised rural economy. According to the author's field survey, the mela had 229 stalls operated by 468 vendors, bringing in a total of ₹985,000 during the fair's duration. A diverse range of small traders, local business owners, food vendors, and service providers are represented among the vendors, each of whom makes a distinct contribution to the mela's commercial ecosystem. Small-scale businessmen, or those who deal in less than 100 kilogrammes of goods, were among the participants. They usually sold artisanal products, pickles, spices, and homemade condiments. They ran 36 stalls with 75 employees, earning a total of ₹54,000. In spite of, these vendors offer reasonably priced goods that appeal to a wide range of mela attendees, despite having lower per capita incomes. They also represent grassroots entrepreneurship. To illustrate a significant amount of commerce in fewer hands and a higher per capita return, large-scale vendors, who handle goods weighing more than 100 kilogrammes, such as bulk spice dealers, branded dry food suppliers, or packaged grocery sellers, occupied 12 stalls with 26 vendors, earning ₹120,000 in total. Food stalls were the most profitable category, with 110 units run by 204 vendors earning an incredible ₹550,000. This dominance highlights how important culinary culture is at Masalā melā, where both traditional and modern food options drew sizable crowds. As consumption patterns change and food becomes more than just a source of sustenance, food stall profitability also reflects these changes (Table 1).

The economy of the vendors at Masalā melā in Gobardanga is a reflection of the thriving rural informal sector, where small-scale trade serves as a vital source of income for marginalised groups (Kim et al, 2016). Vendors ranged from small business owners selling condiments and spices to major traders handling packaged foods, as the field survey revealed. This variety is consistent, which found that local fairs in Bengal serve as essential seasonal marketplaces for unofficial vendors who are frequently shut out of official retail establishments (Kreivi, 2011). Additionally, the prevalence of food stalls, which bring in more than half of the mela's total revenue, emphasises the cultural and economic significance of gastronomy at these gatherings (Chan, 2014).

Table 1: Vendors' economy involved in mela

Vendors Involved	Numbers of stalls	Numbers of vendors	Total Income
Small businessman	36	75	54,000
Large business	12	26	120,000
food stall	110	204	550,000
Household material	53	112	106,000
Rides	15	43	150,000
Others	3	8	15,000

Source: field survey by the author

5.2. Artisans' Space

In addition to providing a venue for traders and food vendors, the Gobardanga Masalā melā was a significant location for the resuscitation and commercialisation of traditional craftsmanship, giving local craftspeople exposure and financial opportunities. According to the author's field survey, there were five different kinds of artisan groups with 37 individual artisans who made a total of ₹58,600 during the fair. These craftsmen displayed their handcrafted goods, many of which are ingrained in Bengal's rural culture, appealing to a growing number of people who value traditional crafts in a festival environment.

The largest group of artisan groups were stone craftspeople, with 13 artisans earning a total of ₹26,000. This indicates that there is a comparatively high market demand for carved stone products, such as utility items, miniature temples, and garden décor. Rural Bengali stonework, which is frequently connected to homes and places of worship, has a special combination of aesthetic appeal and practicality that accounts for its appeal to fairgoers. Seven clay artisans made a total of ₹14,000 from the sale of terracotta objects, pots, traditional diyas, and ornamental figures – items that are still essential to Bengali ritual and household life. Since many of them shaped or painted their products live in front of crowds, their presence also gave the fair a visual and performative element that made it more engaging (Table 2).

The Masalā melā's role in conserving traditional crafts and incorporating them into a contemporary economic framework is demonstrated by the artisans' participation. Even though their pay was lower than that of vendors, artisans who worked with stone, clay, iron, and wood increased their income and visibility (Littrell et al, 2012). The rural fairs are essential hubs for maintaining Bengal's threatened craft industries (Raveesh, 2019). These fairs serve as alternate marketplaces where craftspeople interact directly with culturally aware customers, eschewing middlemen. In a similar vein, notes that these kinds of gatherings provide more than just financial resources; they also support artisanal identity in a shifting social environment and validate traditional knowledge systems.

Table 2: the Artisans' economy involved in mela

Type of Artisans	Numbers	Total income
Mat	4	4400
Clay	7	14000
Wooden	6	7200
Stone	13	26000
Iron	7	7000

Source: field survey by the author



Source: The photo of Masalā melā, captured by the author



Source: The photo of the author and artisan in the time of interview

6. Conclusion

A distinctive cultural formation that conflates tradition and modernity, sacred and secular, local and global, is the Masalā melā of Gobardanga. Being a nonreligious fair, it reorganises the symbolic and spatial aspects of West Bengali mela culture, moving the emphasis from ceremonial devotion to celebration and entrepreneurship driven by the community. According to scholars, these hybrid spaces are becoming more prevalent in modern India, where cultural festivals incorporate digital media, inclusive participation, commercial branding, and folk practices. Masalā melā's presence of vendors and craftspeople not only fuels the unorganised sector but also shows how melas serve as venues for microbusiness, innovation and rural livelihood combining traditional crafts and the fair. Essentially, the Masalā melā offers a public area where community, creativity, and commerce come together, reimagining Gobardanga's cultural landscape. In addition to encouraging a nonreligious but culturally meaningful way of meeting, it encourages economic engagement for small business owners, food vendors, and traditional craftspeople. The fair is a living example of how rural Bengal navigates the forces of modernity without losing its cultural roots because it embraces tradition while reviving it through new forms of engagement. Masalā melā serves as a social experiment and a model for sustainable rural fairs in modern India, as well as an example of an inclusive, secular celebration.

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