



Exploring the Ethnicity and Folk Tradition of the Indigenous People of Jalpaiguri District: A Historical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Jalpaiguri is one of the prominent districts of West Bengal, situated in the foothills of the Himalayas, and it is a treasure trove of history, tradition, culture, and ethnic diversity, offering a unique glimpse into the soul of North Bengal. These diverse ethnic communities, such as the Bengalee, Rajbanshi, Adivasi, Rava, Garo, and Meech, have all left a mark on the rich cultural heritage of the Jalpaiguri District. However, the coexistence of multiple communities has also shaped a harmonious social landscape that flourished on shared values and customs; i.e., Jalpaiguri is also a hub of rich folk culture and heritage. At the same time, the physical landscape of Jalpaiguri has played a significant role in shaping cultural patterns. So, Jalpaiguri is also a hub of folk culture, where different ethnic groups preserve their unique oral traditions through language, music, and dance. Notable folk elements include Bhawaiya, Bishahari, Tista Buri, and Mechini songs of the Rajbanshi community; Maruni, Deosi, and Jhaure dances of the Nepali community; Chyoi dance of the Tamang people; and Nagurnai songs of the Mech community. These cultural expressions reflect the emotions, lifestyle, and close connection to nature of the region's people. In addition to its folk traditions, Jalpaiguri is home to several sacred sites that bear testimony to its spiritual heritage.



The district of Jalpaiguri, located in the eastern Himalayan foothills of West Bengal, is a significant centre of cultural heritage in North Bengal. By the way, the inhabited places of several ethnic communities, like the Bengalee, Rajbanshi, Adivasi, Rava, Garo, and Meech, have all left a mark on the rich cultural heritage of the Jalpaiguri District. The coexistence of these multiple communities has also shaped a harmonious social landscape that flourished on shared values and customs; i.e., Jalpaiguri is also a hub of rich folk culture and heritage. But after the formation of the Alipurduar district in 2024, the remaining Jalpaiguri district became relatively less populated by the tribal population. However, the tribal demographic dominance has the Alipurduar district Jalpaiguri still a mixed ethnic-cultural region rather than a predominantly tribal society.

Geographically, the district is located between 26°16' North and 27°0' North latitude and 88°04' East and 89°53' East longitude. The district is bordered by Darjeeling and Bhutan to the north, Cooch Behar and Bangladesh to the south, Bangladesh and Darjeeling district to the west, and Alipurduar district to the east. The current area of the Jalpaiguri district is 3,386.18 sq. square kilometers. Most parts of the district lie within the piedmont plain at the foothills of the Himalayas, between the 66-metre contour line in the south and the 300-metre contour line in the north. Because of this geographical setting, the district contains a wide variety of natural landscapes. Due to the variation in altitude from south to north, the landform in many places has taken the shape of undulating plains. Furthermore, following the natural slope of the land from the northern mountainous region toward the south, about 188 small and large rivers, streams, and hill torrents (jhôras) flow across the district. The major rivers of the district include the Tista, Karatoya, Dharla, Karala, Mahananda, Jaldhaka, and Jotda. These rivers are mainly fed by glacial water and therefore remain perennial, although their flow becomes thinner during winter. During the monsoon season, the volume of melted glacier water increases and combines with heavy rainfall, causing the rivers to swell and often take on a dangerous form, leading to floods in the surrounding basin areas. Moreover, as these rivers flow down steep slopes, they have strong currents, and their rocky riverbeds make most of them unsuitable for navigation. By the way, the river Tista is the major river of Jalpaiguri district as well as the entire North Bengal region, and it enters Bangladesh where it joins the Brahmaputra River.

There are different opinions among researchers regarding the naming of the Jalpaiguri district. According to D.H.E. Sunder, the district was named “Jalpaiguri” because of the abundance of olive (Jalpai) trees. So, it is said that the name Jalpaiguri came from the word ‘Jalpai’, meaning ‘Olive’, which grew in the town and adjacent areas and the suffix ‘guri’ means a place. Regarding the description of the jalpai or olive tree, Sunder wrote that “A very handsome middle-sized tree which is found throughout the



district. The wood is hard and makes good charcoal. The leaves are useful as fodder. The fruit is about twice the size of a Spanish olive, and makes a splendid pickle, and cooked in carries as a good whet to the appetite, Jalpaiguri obtains its name from this tree.” (Sunder, 2013, p. 97) The name Jalpaiguri was first mentioned in the documents of the East India Company in 1773. At that time, the territory called Jalpaiguri was part of Rangpur district. In 1773, the Collector of Rangpur, Capt. Stuart, captured Jalpaiguri, the capital of Baikunthapur. The relevant portion of his letter was as follows: “At two in the afternoon, I made a second march and took possession.... Jellpyegaurie, the fortress and Capital of the Bycutapore Country.’ (A.M. Kusari, 1981, p. 61) So, according to Captain Stewart's pronunciation, Jalpaiguri appeared as ‘Jellpyegaurie.’ All the more, according to Walter Hamilton, it is identified that Jalpaiguri was situated some distance away, where the capital of Baikunthapur was during the Mughal rule. Hamilton stated that “On the decay of the Mogul power, Dharma Pal left Bykuntpoor and settled at Jelpigory and began to clear the woods of the south, which are now cultivated.” (Hamilton, 1820, p. 216) In 1838, Montgomery Martin did not mention any place named Jalpaiguri in his work; instead, he mentioned places such as Fakirganj, Sannyasikata, and Baikunthapur. (Martin, 1838, reprint 1976, p. 442) In March 1849, the eminent botanist Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker visited the Jalpaiguri palace and the jungle palace of Baikunthapur. In his book *Himalayan Journals*, he mentioned Jeelpigoree, a large straggling village near the banks of the Teesta. (Hooker, 1854, p. 270) During the Anglo-Bhutanese War (1864–65), when Surgeon Rennie travelled through the roads and countryside of Jalpaiguri, at that moment he wrote in his work entitled *Bhotan and the Story of The Dooar War*, “The station and village of Julpigorie are prettily situated and straggle along the bank of the Teesta for some two miles.” (Rennie, 1866, p. 357) However, Paritosh Dutta, a famous scholar on society and culture, says that the term Jalpaiguri originated from the Tibetan word ‘Je-le-pe-go-ri’. The word ‘Je-le-pe’ means a centre for the exchange of wool or warm clothes, and ‘swar’ means east. Therefore, the name may mean a centre for the exchange of warm clothes in the eastern direction. He also suggested another possible meaning: the word ‘Jelepe’ means a centre for exchanging warm clothes, ‘Go’ means ‘door or gateway’, and ‘Ri’ means ‘mountain’. Thus, Jalpaiguri may mean the gateway to the hills where blankets and warm clothes were exchanged. (Dutta, 1398 B.S., p. 20) Many scholars have not supported the Tibetan connection to the name of ‘Jelepegorie’. The reason is that Paritosh Dutta tried to determine the meaning of only one word, ‘Jelepegorie’. However, we have observed that this pronunciation was sometimes rendered as ‘Jelpigory’, sometimes as ‘Jellypeegaurie’, and in several other variant pronunciations. On the other hand, according to some scholars, the significance of the name Jalpaiguri may be connected with the establishment of Jalpesh Temple. (Sharma, 2018, p. 39)



Historical Background

The land and people of Jalpaiguri district have a long and complex history, connected with ancient Assam or Pragjyotishpura, Koch Bihar, and Rangpur. However, ancient texts like the *Mahabharata* mention King Bhagadatta, who ruled in Pragjyotisha. His kingdom likely included areas from Assam to eastern Nepal, covering the Himalayan foothills, where the modern Jalpaiguri is situated. The people of this region were mainly Kiratas, a general term for Tibeto-Burman-speaking Mongoloid groups. (Chatterji, 1951, p. 20) Nowadays, communities like the Meches and Rajbanshis are considered descendants of these early inhabitants. Over the time, many of these groups became influenced by Hindu culture and Sanskritized themselves. From the 4th to the 7th century A.D., the region came under the kingdom of Kamarupa. The most famous ruler was Bhaskaravarman, a contemporary of Harshavardhana and Sasanka. Bhaskaravarman ruled a large territory including Assam and parts of North Bengal. Chinese traveller Yuan Chuang noted that this region was inhabited by Mongoloid tribes. In the 9th century, Jalpaiguri became part of the Pala Empire. Later, different dynasties like the Kambojas and local tribal chiefs ruled parts of the region. Political control often changed, and many tribal rulers (called Bhuinyas) held semi-independent power. (A.M. Kusari, 1981, pp. 49-52)

The medieval history of Jalpaiguri began with Muhammad Bakhtyar Khalji, who after conquering Radh and Varendri started for Tibet in the winter of AD 1206. During this time, he marched towards Tibet through the Karatoya-Tista route, passing through present-day Jalpaiguri, and returned the same way. For the next hundred years, the region was mainly controlled by local feudatory chiefs. Earlier, during the 7th century, Chinese traveller Yuan Chuang noted that this area was part of the Kamarupa kingdom, which extended up to the Karatoya River. The region was known as Duars, meaning “doors” or “passes,” because it had eighteen routes connecting Bhutan with the plains for trade. In medieval times, Duars became an important part of the Kamata Kingdom. Its capital shifted several times, from Nalrajar Garh (in Chilapata Forest) to Maynaguri, then to Prithu Rajar Garh, and later to Gosanimari, which was an important trade center. In 1494, the Kamata Kingdom was destroyed by Alauddin Hussain Shah. After this, the Koch Kingdom was established by Biswa Singha, with its early capital in Hingulavas situated near Mahakalguri in the Dooars region. Later, Cooch Behar became the main capital. Due to internal weakness, the Koch Kingdom was eventually taken over by Bhutan. During this period, Jalpaiguri was largely covered with forests and inhabited mainly by three Mongoloid tribes such as - the Koch, Mech, and Tharu, who were the original people of the region. (A.M. Kusari, 1981, pp. 52-59) In a simple way, ancient Pragjyotishpur was a vast religious, cultural and political region that once included Jalpaiguri and



many surrounding areas, showing that the district has been part of an important historical landscape since very early times.

Ethnic Diversity and Folk Cultural Traditions of Jalpaiguri District

Over the time, the society of Jalpaiguri district has been formed by the interaction of people from many different communities. However, the present research focuses mainly on the indigenous groups of people who are considered the earliest inhabitants of the region. The term ‘indigenous people’ in this context refers to the original settlers of the district, including the number of tribal communities and ethnic groups who inhabited this land long before the arrival and cultural influence of the Aryans and later the Europeans, as was the case in many other parts of the Indian subcontinent.

Historically, the wider region of North-East India experienced several waves of migration and settlement. In different historical periods, people belonging to various ethnic stocks, such as the Dravidian, Austro-Mongoloid, Tibeto-Burman and Mongoloid groups associated with the greater Tai race of South-East Asia, migrated and settled in different parts of the North-Eastern region. (Choudhury, 1987, pp. 40-41) These migrations played a significant role in shaping the demographic composition and cultural diversity of the region. However, the district Jalpaiguri, which is located within the broader cultural zone of North Bengal, became one of the regions where these communities established their settlements and gradually developed distinctive cultural traditions. Among the indigenous communities of Jalpaiguri district, as in other parts of North Bengal, the Bodos are regarded as one of the most significant groups. They are generally believed to belong to the Indo-Mongoloid racial stock and have historically played an important role in the socio-cultural and linguistic life of the region. Several other tribal communities, such as the Koch, Mech, Rabha, Garo and Toto, are also believed to share a common ethnic origin with the Bodos and are often associated with the broader Mongoloid group. Oral traditions also preserved within these communities provide valuable insights into their historical memory and migration narratives. According to Charu Chandra Sanyal, “Such was the history of a Tebeto- Burman speaking Indo- Mongoloid tribe, the Bodos who migrated into India through Patkoi Hills between India and Burma and gradually spread themselves into the whole of modern Assam, North Bengal and parts of East Bengal.” (Sanyal, 1973, p. 30) These migrants gradually settled in different parts of the eastern Himalayan foothills and came to be known as the Bodos. Traditions of communities further narrate that these migrants had five ancestral brothers, namely Meche, Koche, Lapche, Limbu and Rai. Over the time, the descendants of these groups developed separate ethnic identities. Those who followed Lapche came to be known as Lepchas; those associated with Limbu and Rai were called Limbus and Rais; the



followers of Meche were identified as Meches; while those associated with Koche came to be known as Koch. Apart from that, after the British occupation, large number of Oraons and Santhals were brought here as tea garden labourers. Eventually, many of them settled permanently as free cultivators. They are purely Dravidian faces. Such narratives highlight the shared cultural roots and interconnected histories of several indigenous communities living in Jalpaiguri and the surrounding regions. Thus, the indigenous communities of Jalpaiguri district represent an important component of the region's cultural heritage. Their traditions, languages, social structures and not only reflect their deep historical presence in the region but also illustrate the processes through which the diverse cultural landscape of North Bengal has evolved over the time.

a) The Mech

By the way, the Meche, one of the prominent aboriginal tribes of the Sub-Himalayan region of West Bengal, is believed to have been a branch of the Bodos and the Kacheris. (Grunning, 2011, p. 36) It is said that people of the Mech community have been living in the eastern or North Eastern region of the Indian subcontinent since prehistoric times. It is commonly believed that this community came to be known as 'Mech' because some members of this community had settled along the banks of the river Mechi in the Terai. Later on, as inhabitants of the Mechi River's banks, they came to be known as 'Mech'. Scholars believe that the term "Mech" is an abbreviation of the word "Mleccha." (Vasu, 1922, p. 98)

The Meches believed in the *Bathou* religion at the initial stage of their ethnic lives. But later on, they had been converted into the Hindu and Christian religion and many of the Meches became Rajbanshis. By the way, '*Bathou*' is their supreme deity, and the Siju tree (Euphorbia plant) is considered the symbol of the god '*Bathou*'. The stem of the Siju plant (Euphorbia plant) shows five ridges, and therefore it is identified as a symbol of the *Panchashila* principles of the Mech people. (Majumder, 2024, p. 112) At the shrine or *than* of the Siju plant, there are symbols of *Bathou*, Agrang, Mainao, and we find the presence of some other common deities. Beside it, in a *dera* (a simple shelter or covering), there are symbols of other deities such as Mahesh Thakur, Kali, and Bishahari. Outside the village, there is also a shrine dedicated to the village deity known as *Gramdevata* (village Deity). The Mech community has its own priest for conducting worship, who is called a "Rosa." In the Mech society, *Poila Baisakh* (the first day of the Bengali New Year) is considered a sacred day. On that day, all the deities are worshipped together with special sacrifices and offerings. On this occasion, devotional songs and dances are performed to the deities as an act of self-dedication and reverence. However, few devotional songs are -



“Baishagu Gele Nai”, it is their New Year welcoming song; ‘Maigai Nai’ is a very popular jhum cultivation song of the Mech people and ‘Nagur Nai’ is a song associated with fishing. (Majumder, 2024, pp. 112-113)

b) The Rajbanshis

The Rajbanshis are another predominant group among the early settlers of the region, and they belong to the Tibeto-Burman group. H.H. Risley describes that “Koch, Koch-Mandi, Rajbansi, Palliya and Desi belong to a large Dravidian tribe of North Eastern and Eastern Bengal amongst whom there are grounds for suspecting some admixture of Mongolian blood.” (Risley, 1892, p. 491) They formed the most predominant section of the local Hindu population in the region. Although they are generally considered to be of non-Aryan origin, they later adopted their position of Kshatriyas within the Hindu social order. Rajbanshis were the aboriginal inhabitants of the district, as well as other parts of greater North Bengal, in pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial times. They formed the majority in North Bengal, especially in districts like Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Rangpur, Dinajpur, and the plains of Darjeeling. In the plains of the Duars and Jalpaiguri district, they were the dominant group. The Rajbanshis are often believed to have originally belonged to the Koch community, which is generally associated with the Indo-Mongoloid tribal groups and their indigenous cultural traditions, although this view remains debated among scholars. Many historians and social scientists suggest that a section of the Koch people gradually embraced Hinduism and came to be identified as Rajbanshis. This process of cultural transformation led to the blending of tribal beliefs with Hindu religious practices.

Before the widespread influence of Hinduism, the Rajbanshis worshipped numerous local and non-Aryan deities that were closely connected with nature and everyday life. Even after their gradual incorporation into the Hindu fold, many of these indigenous religious traditions continued to exist alongside the worship of Hindu gods and goddesses. Among the important indigenous deities was *Bisto Thakur*, also known as *Jalthakur*, who was regarded as a water deity and was worshipped particularly during the Bengali month of *Bhadra*. Another significant deity was *Brahmo Thakur*, associated with fire (Agni). Other local deities included *Paban Thakur*, the deity of air; *Basumati Thakur*, connected with the earth; *Bishohari Thakurani*, worshipped as a protective goddess. One of the most important local deities of the Rajbanshis is *Bishohari Devi*. In the region of North Bengal, goddess Manasa Devi is popularly known as Bishohari; *Mahakal Thakur*, considered one of the oldest deities; *Gram Thakur*, the village guardian deity; *Shib Thakur* or *Maheswar*, *Lakshi Thakurani*, and *Dharma Thakur*. These deities reflect the strong relationship between Rajbanshi religious life and natural forces. *Tista Buri*, this puja or cult



starts from the first day of the Bengali month Baisakh (April- May). The term '*khela*' indicated the puja of the goddess of river Tista called '*Tista Buri*' or '*Mechni*'. It can be said that the worship had its origin in the 'Mech' clan, who lived in this area before the Rajbanshis.

The worship of *Banadurga* is held every year at the time of *Ekadashi* of Durga worship at *Bhandani* in the village of Barnish near Maynaguri. This worship is performed in accordance with the Rajbanshi Mythology and traditional custom. The immersion of the goddess takes place at midnight on *Ekadashi* and its ritual practices are also linked with Vedic traditions. There was a custom of animal sacrifice, such as goats and pigeons, to the goddess.

c) The Rabhas

The Rabhas belong to Mongoloid race having similarity with other members of blood group, such as Garo, Kachari, Mech, Koch, Hajong and others. Reboti Mohan Saha wrote, "It is known from various sources that their predecessors came to the North- Eastern part of India from Siberia through Mongolia, Chin, Tibet and Brahmaputra before near about 3000 B. C." The religious life of the Ravas includes the basic *animistic* concepts and faiths of other Mongoloid groups akin to them, namely the Mech and the Kachari, but there are also some significant differences. The Supreme God of the Ravas is called Rishi. Besides Rishi, the Ravas worship two female goddesses named Rungtuk and Basek, who are actually the two daughters of Rishi. There are people among the Ravas who consider Rungtuk and Basek as Lakshi or Laksmi and Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of wealth and learning respectively. Moreover, they worship many folk deities and evil spirits. Along with these, they also worship deities such as Shiva, Kali, Kamakhya, Shitala, Mashan, Bishahari, Kalshur, Bakshur, and Satyapir. The performing arts of the Rabha community are very colourful and of high quality. Besides this, the Rabhas have many folk song-dramas. Few of them- a) *Hadangha* – a dance of the ancient jhum (shifting) cultivation period; b) *Hangaisani* – this is a dance performed while preparing the soil and sowing seeds in the fields. c) *Nakcheng-Reni* – a group dance performed while catching small shrimp together in village wetlands or streams.

d) The Nepali

The **Nepali** is one of the prominent ethnic communities of North Bengal. According to the process of ethnogenesis, the Nepali people, like the Bengali people, are also a mixed race. By the way, religiously, most of the Nepalis in the Jalpaiguri district are followers of Hinduism. Among them, there are also some followers of Buddhism and Christianity. However, there is no conflict among them



regarding these religious differences. In particular, followers of Hinduism and Buddhism often participate freely in each other's religious ceremonies. Nepali folk culture is very colourful and rich, and their dance performances are highly attractive and fascinating. Among the most popular Nepali dances, *Maruni* is one of the most prominent. In Nepali society, this song and dance are performed during the time of Kali Puja, from *Ekadashi* to *Amavasya*. It is a group dance. The main performers are 'Purushunge' and 'Maruni.' A young man dresses up as Purushunge, while a young woman performs the role of Maruni. This dance is also known as the dance of the Dashain festival. The main song that accompanies this dance is called Soroti. *Deusi dance* is usually performed on the fourteenth day (Chaturdashi) of the Bengali month of *Kartik*, when people divide into small groups and sing these songs. This dance shows a direct influence of Shaivism (the worship of Lord Shiva). *Jhaure Dance* is another prominent dance among the Nepali community, providing entertainment to the common people. Among Nepali folk dances, it is the most popular as a social dance. It is a collective or group dance. It is performed to the rhythmic beats of the Nepali 'madol' (a traditional drum). The everyday joys and sorrows of rural life are vividly expressed through this dance. *Khukri Dance*, it is a traditional martial dance of the Nepali community. The khukri is the national and religious weapon of the Nepali people and a symbol of bravery. This dance generally performed by Gorkha soldiers. This dance is one of the elements of Nepali folk culture. This dance can also be called a dance drama for its style. It shows that before going to war, a group of soldiers bid farewell to their families or villages, while the women hand over the Khukri in their hands, a symbol of national valor and pray to the Almighty for their victorious return from the war.

e) The Santhal

The Santhals are one of the important indigenous ethnic communities of India. In North Bengal, they have long been settled in the Baikunthapur forest region and in the tea garden areas of Maynaguri and Dhupguri in Jalpaiguri district. They are the original inhabitants of India and belong to proto-Australoid tribes, and their language also belongs to the Austric family, which reflects their deep-rooted ethnic identity. But the nomenclature of 'Santhal' was done much later. It is believed that the word 'Samanta Pal' is the origin of the word 'Santhal', which means protector of border. The Santhal mention themselves as 'Har', meaning human, and many of called themselves 'Kherwal', as the language of the Munda, Ho, Bhumij, Kora, etc. tribes. (Das, 2024, p. 95) Santhal society is divided into clans (gotras), which are family lineages. There are 12 main gotras, and each of them also has smaller sub-divisions. The main gotras are Kisku, Hansda, Murmu, Hembram, Mardi or Mandi, Soren, Tudu, Baskey, Besra,



Chonre, Paunriya, and Bedeya. Traditionally, each of these groups was associated with specific occupations.

By the way, the main deity of the Santhals is Marang Buru. They worship *Marang Buru* in all their festivals. Another important deity of the Santhals is *Singbonga*, the Sun God. *Singbonga* does not harm anyone and protects everyone from danger. Besides these, the Santhals also worship deities like *Marako-Turaiko*, *Jaher Era*, *Gosai Era*, and *Sima Bonga*. The Santhals are especially afraid of *Sima Bonga*, so they worship this deity every year in the village. Other Santhal deities include *Jammin Bonga*, *Pach-Gala-Bonga*, *Majhi Haram Bonga*, *Bura Bonga*, *Jadi Bonga*, *Bir Bonga*, *Sut Bonga*, *Kisang Bonga*, *Baghut Bonga*, and *Rangoruji Bonga*. Like other tribal communities, the Santhals believe in rituals such as healing practices (*jhara-phuk*), magic, charms, and amulets, which are integral to their cultural traditions. (Nath, 2024, p. 92) The aesthetic sense of the Santhal community is an important aspect of their cultural heritage. Their love for beauty is reflected in the cleanliness of their homes and the decorative wall paintings. Santhal women like to wear ornaments, especially silver jewellery. During festivals and ceremonies, they enjoy decorating themselves with flowers. Their clothing is generally very simple. At the same time, the influence of modernity is increasingly visible, showing how their ethnic identity continues to adapt while preserving its cultural roots.

The Oraon

They are also included in the Dravid tribal family and their language is 'Kuruk, which means human. (Nath, 2024, p. 101) Generally, their language is classified as a Dravidian language. All the more it is said that the word 'Kurukh' is named after the traditional tribal hero king 'Kurukh' or a peasant tribe 'Krishan or Kurukha'. (P.Panda & Mal, 2023, p. 5) Originally, they lived in the Konkan region of South India, but the British government brought them here from the Chhota Nagpur area to establish a tea garden or to maintain work. Religiously, the Oraon recognises a Supreme Deity symbolised by the Sun, superior and inferior nature-spirits and potentially beneficent ancestor-spirits and maleficent spirits of certain dead human beings, besides beneficent and maleficent impersonal powers and forces. (Roy, 1928, p. 1) By the way, Oraon religion, like other similar religions, is primarily concerned with ancestral and certain other disembodied souls, and Nature spirits and deities.

However, the Oraon people worship a main deity called "Dharam". They also believe in practices like exorcism, magic, and rituals. Another important religious practice of the Oraon community is called "Sarana." During the bright fortnight of the Bengali months of Chaitra and Baisakh, Sarana worship and Sarana dance are performed at a fixed place under a Sal tree. Only men take part in this dance; women



are not allowed to participate. Musical instruments like the *madal* and *dhamasa* are played along with the dance. ‘Sarhul’ is the biggest festival of the Oraon community. It is celebrated in the month of March-April, when the Sal trees are full of flowers and the fragrance of Mahua spreads all around. At this time, the whole village gathers together to celebrate the Sarhul festival. The *Karam* festival of the Oraons is held on the Shukla Ekadashi of the month of Bhadra. This festival is mainly celebrated for the welfare of the village forests.

Conclusion

Finally, we can say that the district of Jalpaiguri represents a unique example of cultural diversity and historical continuity in North Bengal. From ancient times to the present day, this region has been shaped by various ethnic communities such as the Mech, Rajbanshi, Rabha, Nepali, Santhal, and Oraon. Each of these groups has contributed to the rich cultural heritage of the district through their own traditions, languages, religious beliefs, and social practices. The geographical setting of Jalpaiguri, with its rivers, forests, and foothill landscape, has also played an important role in shaping the lifestyle and cultural expressions of its people. Folk songs, dances, rituals, and festivals reflect a deep connection between humans and nature, which remains a central feature of the region’s cultural identity. Although different communities have their own distinct identities, their long coexistence has created a harmonious social environment based on mutual respect, shared customs, and cultural exchange. Over the time, influences from Hinduism, Christianity, and modern society have brought changes, yet many indigenous traditions have continued to survive and adapt. Therefore, the study of the ethnic diversity and cultural heritage of Jalpaiguri not only helps us understand the past of the region but also highlights the importance of preserving these traditions in the face of modern changes. Protecting and promoting this rich heritage is essential for maintaining the cultural identity and historical legacy of the district for future generations.

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