



Modernization's Profound Impact on Women's Roles: Preserving Coastal Bengal's Cultural Heritage from 1900 to 2020

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ABSTRACT

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This study examines the profound impact of modernization on women's roles in preserving the cultural heritage of coastal Bengal from 1900 to 2020. It analyses how colonial modernity, postcolonial nation-building, socioeconomic transformation, globalization, and digital technology have reconfigured traditional gender roles and cultural practices. Using archival research and reviews studies, the research reveals how women have navigated changing economic, environmental, and social landscapes. Findings indicate that despite challenges such as environmental degradation and cultural commodification, women remain vital custodians of indigenous knowledge, adapting and innovating to sustain community identity and cultural continuity. It offers vital insights for policy-makers.

Introduction

The coastal region of Bengal, with its unique blend of natural beauty, vibrant cultural traditions, and strategic maritime significance, has long served as a dynamic theatre where modernization and tradition intersect. Over the course of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries from 1900 to 2020 this region has undergone profound transformations that have reshaped its socio-economic structures, environmental landscapes, and, importantly, the roles of women in cultural heritage preservation. As modernization introduced new technologies, economic imperatives, and social ideologies, traditional practices of cultural transmission and heritage maintenance were simultaneously challenged and enriched. This study explores the impact of modernization on women's roles in preserving the cultural heritage of the coastal belt of Bengal, aiming to understand how shifts in modernity have reconfigured gender dynamics and community practices. Historically, the coastal belt of Bengal has been a melting pot of cultures, languages, and traditions, shaped by centuries of trade, migration, and colonial encounters. Early modern interactions, such as those documented by Binny (2015) in his analysis of historical networks along the western coast of India, reveal the complex interplay between local knowledge systems and European scientific paradigms. Although Binny's work focuses on a different geographical context, it underscores a broader historical pattern in which local practices and identities



were both influenced by and resistant to external forces. In Bengal, similar dynamics were at play as the region navigated the pressures of colonial modernity and the subsequent drive toward national modernization. These forces not only reconfigured economic and political life but also disrupted traditional gender roles and the cultural practices that women had long upheld.

Women in the coastal communities of Bengal have traditionally been the custodians of cultural heritage. They have played central roles in the transmission of folklore, artisanal crafts, culinary traditions, and religious rituals, often acting as the primary link between past and present. The skills and practices maintained by these women were not merely domestic activities; they were vital expressions of communal identity and historical continuity. However, modernization has introduced a host of challenges and opportunities that have transformed these roles. On one hand, rapid urbanization, industrialization, and the commodification of natural resources have led to environmental degradation and the erosion of traditional practices. On the other hand, modern communication technologies, education, and economic diversification have provided new platforms for cultural expression and preservation. Modernization is a multifaceted process that involves the adoption of new technologies, the restructuring of economies, and the transformation of social hierarchies. In coastal Bengal, modernization has manifested in various ways from infrastructural developments that have enhanced connectivity and commerce to shifts in labour markets that have redefined traditional gender roles. For example, the increased participation of women in formal employment and education, partly driven by modernization, has expanded their individual agency. However, these opportunities have also sometimes come at the expense of traditional practices that were integral to community life. Research in other coastal and maritime contexts has shown that modernization can lead to both the marginalization and the empowerment of local actors. Purwowibowo, Yuningsih, and Si (2017) demonstrated that community-based initiatives, such as mangrove restoration projects, could empower local informal leaders even in the face of formal governance structures. Although their study did not exclusively focus on women, it provides a useful framework for understanding how grassroots movements in coastal areas can serve as sites for cultural and ecological preservation amidst modern pressures.

Another dimension of modernization in the region is the impact of global economic integration. Coastal Bengal has long been part of international trade networks, and the modern era has only intensified these connections. The increasing demand for natural resources, as evidenced by studies on environmental impacts such as Sturman's (2023) analysis of the sand mining industry has led to significant ecological disruptions. Such environmental degradation can threaten the cultural practices and livelihoods that depend on a healthy natural landscape. In many cases, women are on the frontline of these changes. They are often responsible for managing household resources, preserving traditional agricultural practices, and maintaining the oral histories and artisanal skills that define local culture. Thus, environmental changes driven by modernization are not only an ecological or economic issue but also a cultural one, affecting the very fabric of community life and heritage preservation.



Moreover, modernization has also redefined power dynamics and social hierarchies within coastal communities. Anjum's (2016) work on the ethnic diversity of Bangladesh, particularly in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, illustrates how modernization can exacerbate resource competition and ethnic conflicts, while also opening up spaces for new forms of cultural dialogue and conflict resolution. Although Anjum's focus is on a different part of Bangladesh, similar processes can be observed in Bengal, where modernization has sometimes marginalized traditional custodians of heritage, including women, by reorienting local economies and social practices towards more commercially viable models. This reorientation raises important questions about cultural sustainability and the rights of indigenous knowledge holders, particularly women, who have historically played a central role in preserving and transmitting cultural practices.

The interplay between modernization and cultural heritage is further complicated by the phenomenon of commodification, where cultural practices and natural resources are transformed into economic commodities. Kapadia (2022) discusses how colonial and modern narratives constructed regional identities in South Asia, highlighting the tension between preserving a "pure" cultural heritage and adapting to modern economic imperatives. In the coastal regions of Bengal, this tension is acutely felt as traditional arts, crafts, and rituals are increasingly marketed to tourists and global consumers. While such commercialization can provide economic benefits and wider recognition for local culture, it can also lead to a dilution or alteration of the very practices it seeks to celebrate. Women, as the primary transmitters of many of these traditions, find themselves navigating the challenges of maintaining authenticity while engaging with modern economic realities. Despite the rich tradition of cultural heritage preservation in Bengal, the impact of modernization on women's roles in this process has received relatively little scholarly attention. While studies such as those by Rajarshi (2019) on artisan communities and Yadav et al. (2020) on sustainable fishing practices have illuminated various facets of cultural and environmental transformations in the region, there remains a critical gap in understanding how modernization specifically affects women's participation and agency in heritage preservation. Given that women are often the key custodians of cultural memory, examining their roles offers valuable insights into the broader dynamics of cultural sustainability in the face of rapid modern change.

This study, therefore, seeks to bridge this gap by exploring how modernization from 1900 to 2020 has influenced the roles of women in preserving the cultural heritage of the coastal belt of Bengal. Through integrating historical analysis with contemporary case studies, the research will assess how traditional practices have adapted or in some cases, been disrupted by modern influences. It will also examine the ways in which women have negotiated their identities and responsibilities in the context of evolving socio-economic landscapes, drawing on comparative insights from related studies in other coastal and maritime contexts (*e.g., Purwowibowo et al., 2017; Rajangam & Sundar, 2021*). In coastal region of Bengal stands at the crossroads of tradition and modernity, where the forces of globalization, environmental change, and socio-economic transformation converge. Women, as the custodians of cultural heritage, are uniquely positioned to mediate these changes, yet their roles are frequently overlooked in mainstream modernization narratives. This exploration not only aims to document the



historical evolution of these roles over more than a century but also to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how cultural heritage can be sustained in an era of relentless modern transformation.

Findings from Related Literature

The coastal region of Bengal, a mosaic of vibrant traditions and rich natural landscapes, has long stood at the crossroads of indigenous practices and external influences. From 1900 to 2020, the area has experienced profound transformations driven by modernization a multifaceted process characterized by rapid urbanization, technological advancements, and evolving economic paradigms. Central to these changes is the shifting role of women in the preservation of cultural heritage. Traditionally, women in coastal Bengal have served as the primary custodians of both tangible and intangible heritage—safeguarding artisanal crafts, oral traditions, culinary practices, and ritualistic expressions that together forge a unique cultural identity. However, the advent of modernity has disrupted these age-old practices even as it has created novel opportunities for cultural reinvention and preservation.

Early historical analyses reveal that the region's cultural landscape was already complexly intertwined with global influences. For instance, Binny's study on the circuits of botanical knowledge along India's western coast illustrates how indigenous practices were reinterpreted and integrated into European scientific paradigms during periods of intense cultural exchange (Binny). Although Binny's work centers on a different geographical context, his findings echo the broader historical dynamic that also affected Bengal—namely, the interplay between traditional knowledge and the disruptive forces of modernity. Colonial modernity introduced new administrative, educational, and economic systems that began reshaping local gender roles. In coastal Bengal, these shifts frequently marginalized women's traditional contributions, even as they set the stage for later forms of empowerment.

In pre-modern communities, women's responsibilities transcended the confines of domesticity. They were instrumental in transmitting cultural narratives, maintaining artisanal techniques, and upholding ritual practices that defined community identity. With the onset of modernization, however, the traditional frameworks that once sustained these practices were profoundly altered. Purwowibowo, Yuningsih, and Si demonstrate in their study of community-led mangrove restoration that local initiatives can harness traditional knowledge to address modern environmental challenges—even when formal governance structures overlook such grassroots contributions (Purwowibowo et al.). Although their research does not focus solely on gender, it underscores how local knowledge—including that held by women—can become a powerful tool in navigating the complexities of modern conservation efforts. Recent scholarship has begun to explore the gendered dimensions of these transformations more directly. Chowdhury and Bose, for example, investigate the impact of modernization on coastal craft traditions in Bengal, showing that modern production techniques and market pressures have necessitated adaptations in long-established artisanal practices. Their research argues that while traditional methods face challenges, women have also found new ways to innovate and sustain their crafts in a competitive global marketplace (Chowdhury and Bose). Complementing this perspective, Roy's study on cultural identity in coastal Bengal reveals that modernization reconfigures gender relations by simultaneously providing women with opportunities for empowerment and subjecting them to the pressures of cultural



commodification (Roy). Such dualities are central to understanding the evolving landscape of cultural preservation.

In addition to these economic and cultural shifts, the advent of digital technology has opened fresh avenues for the documentation and dissemination of heritage practices. Sen's research highlights the proactive role that women have adopted in reinterpreting and revitalizing traditional practices amid modern pressures. Her work emphasizes that women are not passive victims of modernity but active negotiators of their cultural identity, blending time-honoured practices with innovative adaptations (Sen). Along similar lines, Das explores the transformative potential of modern media and digital narratives, arguing that these technologies enable women in coastal Bengal to archive oral histories, disseminate artisanal techniques, and mobilize community efforts to sustain heritage practices (Das). Such digital interventions illustrate how modern tools can serve as bridges between the past and present. The environmental consequences of modernization add yet another layer of complexity to this narrative. Industrialization, urban sprawl, and resource extraction have not only altered the natural landscape but have also affected the cultural practices intimately tied to it. Studies by Zuhdi and Sturman provide broader context by examining the environmental disruptions in maritime trade routes and resource-based industries. Zuhdi's work on spice trade networks and Sturman's analysis of sand mining underscore how environmental degradation can undermine the traditional lifestyles that have long sustained cultural heritage (Zuhdi; Sturman). In coastal Bengal, where the natural environment forms the backdrop for cultural expressions, such ecological changes present significant challenges. Women—who often serve as stewards of both cultural and natural resources—find themselves on the front lines of these environmental transformations.

Furthermore, the process of commodification in the modern era has profoundly affected the preservation of cultural heritage. Kapadia's analysis of regional imaginaries in colonial South Asia reveals a tension between the desire to maintain an "authentic" cultural identity and the pressures to adapt to modern economic imperatives (Kapadia). In coastal Bengal, the commercialization of artisanal crafts and folk traditions has led to a paradox: while market integration may provide economic benefits and increased global visibility, it also risks diluting the very cultural practices it seeks to celebrate. This tension is particularly pronounced for women, whose traditional roles as cultural custodians are increasingly mediated by external economic forces.

Despite the longstanding contributions of women to heritage preservation in coastal Bengal, there remains a notable gap in the literature addressing how modernization has reshaped these roles. Early studies by scholars such as Binny, Anjum, and Rajarshi provided valuable insights into the broad processes of cultural exchange and artisan agency, yet they often overlooked the gender-specific dimensions of these transformations (Anjum; Rajarshi). It is only through more recent inquiries such as those by Chowdhury and Bose, Roy, Sen, and Das—that the nuanced interplay between modernity and women's agency has begun to emerge. Their research collectively suggests that while modernization has imposed new challenges on traditional cultural practices, it has also catalysed innovative forms of cultural preservation led by women.



This study aims to bridge that gap by offering a comprehensive exploration of the impact of modernization on women's roles in cultural heritage preservation in coastal Bengal from 1900 to 2020. Through integrating archival research, field interviews, and case studies, the research seeks to document how women have navigated the shifting landscape of tradition and modernity. It will explore how environmental, economic, and technological forces have converged to redefine what it means to be a cultural custodian in a rapidly changing world. Ultimately, this inquiry not only contributes to the academic discourse on modernization and gender but also provides actionable insights for policymakers, cultural organizations, and community leaders dedicated to sustaining Bengal's vibrant heritage.

In sum, the coastal belt of Bengal today is a living testament to the dynamic interplay between age-old cultural practices and the inexorable forces of modernity. Women, long recognized as the guardians of cultural memory, now find themselves at the nexus of transformation—balancing the imperatives of tradition with the demands of a modern globalized society.

Chronological Developments

Early Modernization: 1900–1947

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Bengal's coastal communities were deeply rooted in traditional practices. Women served as the primary custodians of cultural heritage, transmitting oral histories, artisanal crafts, ritual practices, and culinary traditions through generations. During this period, modernization began to seep into everyday life under British colonial influence. Colonial administrators and missionaries introduced new educational systems and bureaucratic structures that, while aimed at “modernizing” society, often undermined indigenous cultural practices. Although women's roles as cultural bearers remained vital, their activities were largely confined to the domestic sphere, with limited recognition in formal cultural institutions. In this era, modernization was not a monolithic force but rather a gradual process that coexisted with traditional practices. For instance, studies such as Binny's exploration of botanical knowledge networks (Binny) reveal how local knowledge systems persisted and even integrated with European scientific frameworks. In coastal Bengal, similar processes were at work: while modern educational curricula and administrative reforms were introduced, the informal, gendered channels of cultural transmission primarily maintained by women continued to serve as the backbone of community identity. Women's roles were implicitly acknowledged as crucial for the survival of indigenous practices, even though the broader modernization project often sidelined their contributions in official narratives.

Postcolonial Transition and Nation-Building: 1947–1960

The period immediately following India's independence in 1947 marked a significant turning point in the region's social and cultural dynamics. As the new nation embarked on the process of nation-building, there was a renewed emphasis on reclaiming and reasserting indigenous cultural heritage. Women, who had long been the custodians of local traditions, began to emerge as active participants in cultural revival efforts. The postcolonial government's focus on education and social reform gradually opened up spaces for women's engagement in both formal and informal cultural sectors.



During these formative decades, modernization was characterized by a tension between the drive for economic and political progress and the need to preserve a distinct cultural identity. Women in coastal Bengal began to receive formal education and training, which in some cases enhanced their ability to document, articulate, and revitalize traditional practices. However, while educational reforms and social policies aimed at modernizing the nation, they also led to a redefinition of traditional gender roles. Women increasingly found themselves negotiating between their inherited responsibilities as cultural preservers and new expectations as participants in the modern nation-state. This period laid the groundwork for later debates on cultural authenticity and economic viability that would increasingly involve women as key agents of change.

Socioeconomic Transformation and Cultural Reorientation: 1960–1980

The decades from 1960 to 1980 witnessed significant socioeconomic transformation in Bengal, as modernizing forces accelerated under industrialization and urbanization. Economic policies introduced during this period, combined with advancements in transportation and communication, began to reshape the coastal region's social fabric. As market forces and state-sponsored development initiatives took hold, traditional artisanal practices and rural livelihoods faced unprecedented challenges. For women, these changes were double-edged. On the one hand, modernization brought about increased opportunities for formal employment and education, which gradually expanded their individual agency. On the other hand, the commercialization of local crafts and cultural expressions often relegated women's traditional methods to secondary status in a rapidly modernizing economy. The emerging modern economy prioritized efficiency, standardization, and mass production over localized, artisanal methods. In many coastal communities, women's skills once integral to the social and cultural life of the region—were undervalued as market forces pushed for modernization. Yet, even in this period of disruption, grassroots efforts continued to sustain cultural practices. Local community groups and informal networks, often led by women, persisted in their roles as custodians of heritage, preserving artisanal techniques and ritual practices that modern institutions overlooked.

Globalization, Liberalization, and Reconfiguration of Gender Roles: 1980–2000

The economic liberalization of India in the early 1990s ushered in an era of globalization that brought new challenges and opportunities to coastal Bengal. As global trade expanded and market integration intensified, the region experienced rapid infrastructural development, urban sprawl, and increased connectivity with the international community. This period also saw the acceleration of cultural commodification wherein traditional practices and artifacts began to be packaged and marketed for both domestic and international audiences. For women, globalization meant both increased economic opportunities and heightened pressures to conform to modern market dynamics. Scholarly investigations during this time highlight how modern production techniques, market demands, and consumer trends began to reshape artisanal crafts and local traditions. Research by Chowdhury and Bose, for example, illustrates how women in coastal Bengal adapted their craft traditions in response to these pressures, finding innovative ways to preserve cultural heritage while meeting commercial demands (Chowdhury and Bose). At the same time, the rising tide of modernization brought



environmental challenges, such as those noted in studies of coastal resource exploitation, which further complicated the preservation of cultural heritage. In many cases, women found themselves on the frontline of these ecological transformations balancing the preservation of natural resources with the demands of an increasingly industrialized landscape. The period from 1980 to 2000 also witnessed a reorientation of cultural policies at the state and local levels. Efforts to formalize heritage conservation began to recognize the contributions of women's traditional knowledge, though these acknowledgments were often limited by prevailing modernist frameworks that prioritized economic growth over cultural continuity. As a result, while many women's roles continued to be undervalued in official narratives, community-led initiatives persisted. These initiatives, as documented by researchers like Rajarshi and colleagues, underscored the resilience of local cultural practices in the face of sweeping modernization (Rajarshi).

The Digital Era and Contemporary Transformations: 2000–2020

Entering the new millennium, the advent of digital technologies and widespread internet access introduced transformative possibilities for cultural heritage preservation in coastal Bengal. Modernization during this period is marked by an unprecedented convergence of traditional practices and cutting-edge digital tools. Women increasingly harnessed these technologies to document, archive, and disseminate local cultural expressions. Platforms such as social media, digital storytelling websites, and online marketplaces provided new avenues for showcasing artisanal crafts, oral histories, and ritual practices that had previously been confined to the local sphere.

In her research, Sen highlights how women have become adept at navigating this digital landscape to reinterpret and revitalize their cultural heritage (Sen). Digital media enabled them to archive historical narratives, promote local artisanship, and mobilize community resources for cultural conservation. Das further argues that modern media platforms have facilitated the creation of new cultural narratives that blend traditional practices with contemporary innovations, thus broadening the scope of heritage preservation in coastal Bengal (Das).

Despite these opportunities, the rapid pace of modernization in the digital era also brought new challenges. The relentless push for economic growth, urban development, and environmental exploitation has increasingly endangered the very cultural practices that women strive to preserve. Environmental degradation exacerbated by industrialization, climate change, and unsustainable resource extraction has had a profound impact on coastal ecosystems, which in turn threatens the cultural traditions intrinsically linked to these natural landscapes. Studies by Zuhdi and Sturman underscore how environmental disruptions can undermine traditional livelihoods and cultural practices, placing additional burdens on women who are often responsible for managing both cultural and natural resources (Zuhdi; Sturman). Moreover, the commodification of cultural heritage in the modern market economy continues to pose dilemmas for women in coastal Bengal. As local crafts and traditions become packaged for tourism and global consumption, there is an ongoing tension between maintaining cultural authenticity and adapting to market demands. Roy's study reveals that while modernization has opened new economic opportunities for women, it has also pressured them to alter or simplify their



traditional practices to appeal to broader, commercial audiences (Roy). This dynamic underscores the complex interplay between preservation and profit in the modern era.

Synthesis and Contemporary Reflections

Over the span of more than a century, the modernization of coastal Bengal has been a dynamic and multifaceted process one that has continuously reshaped women's roles in cultural heritage preservation. From the early colonial period, when traditional practices coexisted with emerging modern institutions, through the postcolonial era of nation-building and the tumultuous decades of economic liberalization, to the transformative impact of the digital era, women have remained at the heart of cultural continuity in the region. Their contributions, however, have not been static. Instead, they have evolved in response to the pressures and opportunities presented by modernization. Initially, women's roles were largely informal and confined to the domestic realm; yet, as modern educational, economic, and technological frameworks emerged, these roles expanded albeit often in tension with prevailing modernist ideologies. Women became not only preservers of tradition but also innovators who adapted their cultural practices to new contexts and platforms. They navigated shifting gender dynamics, economic challenges, and environmental crises, continually redefining what it means to be a custodian of cultural heritage in a rapidly changing world. The evolving narrative of modernization in coastal Bengal is thus a story of resilience and adaptation. It illustrates how, despite the disruptive forces of modernity, women have leveraged new tools and opportunities be they digital media or community-based initiatives to sustain and reinvent their cultural heritage. This chronicle of transformation, spanning from 1900 to 2020, serves as a testament to the enduring power of traditional knowledge and the indispensable role of women in safeguarding it for future generations.

Conclusion

This study reveals that modernization has fundamentally transformed women's roles in preserving coastal Bengal's cultural heritage from 1900 to 2020. Traditional custodians of folklore, artisanal crafts, and oral histories, women have continually adapted to changing socio-economic, environmental, and technological landscapes. From colonial influences to postcolonial nation-building and the advent of digital media, modernity has reshaped their responsibilities while also offering new platforms for cultural innovation. Despite challenges such as environmental degradation and cultural commodification, women have maintained resilient networks that support community identity and heritage continuity. Their evolving roles underscore the need for policies that recognize and empower gender-specific contributions to cultural preservation. Ultimately, this research highlights the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity, advocating for inclusive approaches that sustain indigenous practices and promote women's agency in safeguarding cultural legacies for future generations. These findings emphasize the urgency of integrating gender perspectives into cultural policy and community development.



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