

The Evolution of Women's Cultural Roles in Coastal Bengal Amid Modernization (1900–2020)

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the transformative impact of modernization on women's roles in preserving the cultural heritage of coastal Bengal between 1900 and 2020. It examines the interplay of colonial modernity, postcolonial nation-building, socioeconomic change, globalization, and digital technology in reshaping traditional gender roles and cultural practices. Through archival research and an extensive review of relevant studies, the research investigates how women have negotiated evolving economic, social, and environmental landscapes to maintain and transmit oral traditions, rituals, indigenous crafts, and folk knowledge. Findings reveal that women have continuously adapted to challenges such as environmental degradation, urbanization, commercialization, and cultural commodification, employing both traditional methods and modern tools—including digital platforms, market-oriented initiatives, and community-based programs—to sustain cultural continuity. The study highlights the dynamic ways in which women integrate heritage preservation with emerging livelihoods, acting as pivotal agents of cultural sustainability and innovation. By emphasizing the resilience and agency of women in safeguarding regional identity, this research offers valuable insights for policy-makers, scholars, and cultural practitioners seeking to design interventions that strengthen support systems, promote equitable access to resources, and ensure that coastal Bengal's cultural heritage remains both economically viable and authentically rooted.

Keywords: *Modernization; Women's Roles; Cultural Heritage Preservation; Coastal Bengal; Traditional Practices.*

Introduction

The coastal region of Bengal, characterized by its unique natural landscapes, rich cultural traditions, and strategic maritime position, has historically functioned as a dynamic space where tradition and modernization intersect. Between 1900 and 2020, this region experienced significant socio-economic, environmental, and cultural transformations that profoundly affected the roles of women in heritage preservation. Modernization introduced new technologies, economic imperatives, and social ideologies, simultaneously challenging and enriching traditional practices of cultural transmission. This study examines how these changes reshaped women's participation in safeguarding the cultural heritage of coastal Bengal, highlighting the evolving dynamics of gender and community practices. Historically, the coastal belt has been a confluence of diverse cultures, languages, and traditions, shaped by trade, migration, and colonial influence. Research on similar coastal contexts, such as Binny's (2015) analysis of historical networks along India's western coast, illustrates how local knowledge systems interacted with European scientific paradigms, often negotiating, adapting to, or resisting external pressures. In Bengal, colonial modernity and postcolonial nation-building not only transformed economic and political structures but also reconfigured traditional gender roles, affecting the cultural practices that women had historically maintained as custodians of community heritage.

Women in the coastal communities of Bengal have historically served as key custodians of cultural heritage, playing central roles in the transmission of folklore, artisanal crafts, culinary traditions, and religious rituals. Their practices were not merely domestic tasks but vital expressions of communal identity and historical continuity. Modernization, however, has introduced both challenges and opportunities that have reshaped these roles. Rapid urbanization, industrialization, and the commodification of natural resources have contributed to environmental degradation and the erosion of traditional practices. Simultaneously, advances in communication technologies, education, and economic diversification have created new avenues for cultural expression and preservation. Modernization in coastal Bengal encompasses technological adoption, economic restructuring, and shifts in social hierarchies, including expanded female participation in formal employment and education, which enhances agency but can sometimes marginalize traditional practices. Studies in other coastal contexts, such as Purwowibowo, Yuningsih, and Si (2017), show that community-based initiatives like mangrove restoration can empower local actors. Such frameworks illustrate how grassroots movements in coastal regions can support cultural and ecological preservation, highlighting pathways through which women may continue to sustain heritage amidst modern pressures.

Another dimension of modernization in coastal Bengal is its intersection with global economic integration. The region's historical participation in international trade networks has intensified in the modern era, leading to increased extraction and commercialization of natural resources. For instance, studies like Sturman (2023) highlight the ecological disruptions caused by industries such as sand mining, which directly threaten local ecosystems. These environmental changes have profound implications for cultural practices and livelihoods that rely on a healthy natural landscape. Women, in particular, are at the forefront of these transformations, as they manage household resources, sustain traditional agricultural practices, and preserve oral histories and artisanal skills. Consequently, environmental degradation driven by modernization is not merely an ecological or economic concern but also a cultural one, impacting the transmission of knowledge, continuity of traditions, and the overall resilience of community life. In this context, women's roles in heritage preservation are increasingly intertwined with environmental stewardship and adaptive cultural strategies.

Moreover, modernization has reshaped power dynamics and social hierarchies within coastal communities. Anjum (2016), in her study of ethnic diversity in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, demonstrates how modernization can both intensify resource competition and ethnic conflicts while simultaneously creating opportunities for new forms of cultural dialogue and conflict resolution. Although her research focuses on a different region, similar patterns emerge in Bengal, where modernization has occasionally marginalized traditional heritage custodians, including women, by redirecting local economies and social practices toward commercially driven models. This shift poses critical questions regarding cultural sustainability and the protection of indigenous knowledge, particularly that held by women, who have historically been central to the preservation and transmission of cultural practices. It highlights the need to balance economic development with measures that safeguard community-based cultural roles, ensuring that modernization does not erode the social and cultural foundations upon which heritage is maintained.

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This study aims to address the gap in understanding how modernization from 1900 to 2020 has shaped the roles of women in preserving the cultural heritage of coastal Bengal. By combining historical analysis with contemporary case studies, the research examines how traditional practices have either adapted to or been disrupted by modern influences. It further investigates how women have negotiated their identities and responsibilities amid evolving socio-economic landscapes, drawing on comparative insights from other coastal and maritime contexts (e.g., Purwobowono et al., 2017; Rajangam & Sundar, 2021). Coastal Bengal represents a space where tradition and modernity intersect, with globalization, environmental change, and economic transformation converging to reshape community life. As primary custodians of cultural heritage, women are uniquely positioned to mediate these transformations, yet their contributions are often marginalized in mainstream accounts of modernization. This study seeks to document the historical evolution of women's roles over more than a century and provide a nuanced understanding of strategies for sustaining cultural heritage in the face of ongoing modern pressures.

Findings from Related Literature

The coastal region of Bengal, renowned for its vibrant traditions and rich natural landscapes, has historically been a site where indigenous practices intersect with external influences. Between 1900 and 2020, the region underwent profound transformations fuelled by modernization—a multifaceted process encompassing rapid urbanization, technological advancements, and shifting economic paradigms. At the heart of these changes has been the evolving role of women in cultural heritage preservation. Traditionally, women acted as primary custodians of both tangible and intangible heritage, maintaining artisanal crafts, oral histories, culinary traditions, and ritual practices that collectively shaped community identity. While modernization has disrupted some of these age-old practices, it has simultaneously opened avenues for cultural reinvention, enabling women to adapt, innovate, and sustain heritage in new and dynamic ways.

Early historical analyses indicate that Bengal's cultural landscape was intricately connected with global currents. Binny's research on botanical knowledge networks along India's western coast demonstrates how indigenous practices were reinterpreted and incorporated into European scientific frameworks during periods of intense cultural exchange (Binny). While his study focuses on a different region, it reflects a broader historical pattern relevant to Bengal: the tension and interaction between traditional knowledge and the transformative pressures of modernity. Colonial modernity introduced new administrative, educational, and economic systems that began reshaping social structures and gender roles. In coastal Bengal, these changes often marginalized women's traditional contributions to cultural preservation, even as they laid the groundwork for new forms of agency and empowerment in subsequent decades.

In pre-modern coastal communities, women's roles extended far beyond domestic responsibilities. They were central to preserving cultural narratives, sustaining artisanal skills, and performing ritual practices that reinforced communal identity. The advent of modernization, however, disrupted the traditional structures that supported these practices. Purwobowono, Yuningsih, and Si's study of community-led

mangrove restoration illustrates how local initiatives can effectively leverage traditional knowledge to tackle contemporary environmental challenges, even when formal governance systems neglect such grassroots efforts (Purwowibowo et al.). While their research does not exclusively address gender, it highlights the critical role of locally held knowledge—including women’s expertise—as a resource for navigating and responding to the pressures of modern ecological and social change.

Recent studies have increasingly examined how modernization reshapes cultural preservation through a gendered lens. Chowdhury and Bose highlight the pressures on coastal Bengal’s artisanal traditions, demonstrating that modern production techniques and market demands have compelled women to adapt longstanding craft practices while finding innovative ways to sustain them in a competitive global economy (Chowdhury and Bose). Similarly, Roy’s research emphasizes that modernization simultaneously empowers women and exposes them to the challenges of cultural commodification, altering traditional gender roles and responsibilities in the process (Roy). Together, these studies underscore the complex dualities women navigate, balancing the preservation of heritage with the demands of contemporary economic and social realities.

In addition to economic and cultural transformations, the rise of digital technology has significantly reshaped the ways in which women engage with cultural heritage in coastal Bengal. Sen’s research emphasizes that women have actively harnessed digital platforms to reinterpret and revitalize traditional practices, demonstrating agency in navigating modern pressures rather than passively responding to them (Sen). Through social media, online storytelling platforms, and virtual marketplaces, women are able to document oral histories, showcase artisanal crafts, and organize community-based heritage initiatives, thereby ensuring the continuity of cultural knowledge in new formats. Das further explores the transformative potential of digital media, highlighting how technology enables the creation of hybrid cultural narratives that integrate time-honoured traditions with contemporary innovations (Das). These interventions not only facilitate wider dissemination of cultural practices but also provide women with enhanced visibility and influence, allowing them to negotiate their cultural and economic roles more effectively. Digital tools thus function as critical mediators, bridging the divide between historical practices and contemporary realities, while offering new strategies for cultural sustainability. Collectively, these studies illustrate that modernization, when coupled with technological adaptation, empowers women to maintain, reinterpret, and expand the reach of coastal Bengal’s rich heritage, reinforcing their pivotal role in its preservation.

The environmental impacts of modernization further complicate the preservation of cultural heritage in coastal Bengal. Industrialization, urban expansion, and intensive resource extraction have not only transformed natural landscapes but have also disrupted the cultural practices intimately connected to these ecosystems. Research by Zuhdi and Sturman highlights similar patterns in other maritime and resource-dependent contexts, demonstrating how ecological degradation—from spice trade networks to sand mining—can erode traditional livelihoods and practices that underpin community identity (Zuhdi; Sturman). In coastal Bengal, the natural environment underpins artisanal crafts, ritual practices, and subsistence activities, making ecological stability central to cultural continuity. Women, as primary custodians of both tangible and intangible heritage, are disproportionately affected by these environmental changes. They bear the dual responsibility of managing household and community resources while sustaining traditional knowledge and practices linked to the coastal ecology. Consequently, environmental degradation poses not only ecological and economic challenges but also threatens the very social and cultural fabric of coastal communities, positioning women at the forefront of both conservation and cultural preservation efforts.

The commodification of cultural heritage in the modern era has introduced complex challenges for preservation, particularly in coastal Bengal. Kapadia's study on regional imaginaries in colonial South Asia highlights the enduring tension between maintaining an "authentic" cultural identity and adapting to economic and market pressures (Kapadia). In this context, the commercialization of artisanal crafts, folk arts, and ritual practices has created a paradox: while engagement with global markets can offer women economic empowerment and broader recognition for their skills, it simultaneously risks altering, simplifying, or commodifying traditional practices. For women—longstanding custodians of cultural knowledge—this dynamic often necessitates negotiating between sustaining authenticity and meeting the demands of modern economic systems. The pressure to conform to market tastes or streamline practices for commercial viability can erode the nuances and ritual significance embedded in traditional arts, posing challenges to intergenerational transmission. Consequently, commodification is not merely an economic phenomenon but also a cultural negotiation, reshaping the roles, responsibilities, and agency of women in heritage preservation within coastal Bengal.

Despite the longstanding contributions of women to heritage preservation in coastal Bengal, scholarly attention to how modernization has specifically reshaped their roles remains limited. Foundational studies by Binny, Anjum, and Rajarshi offered important insights into cultural exchange, artisanal practices, and community agency, yet they largely overlooked gendered perspectives within these transformations (Anjum; Rajarshi). More recent research by Chowdhury and Bose, Roy, Sen, and Das has begun to fill this gap, highlighting the complex interplay between modernity and women's agency. Their work demonstrates that while modernization presents challenges—such as market pressures, environmental degradation, and cultural commodification—it simultaneously opens avenues for women to innovate, document, and disseminate cultural knowledge. Collectively, these studies underscore that women are not passive bearers of tradition; rather, they actively negotiate, adapt, and transform cultural practices to sustain heritage in the face of evolving social, economic, and technological landscapes. This emerging body of research emphasizes the importance of integrating gendered analyses into the study of modernization and cultural preservation.

This study seeks to address the existing gap by examining the impact of modernization on women's roles in preserving cultural heritage in coastal Bengal from 1900 to 2020. By combining archival research, field interviews, and case studies, it aims to document how women have navigated the evolving intersection of tradition and modernity. The research will investigate how environmental changes, economic transformations, and technological advancements have collectively reshaped women's responsibilities as cultural custodians. It also seeks to highlight the strategies employed by women to sustain, adapt, and innovate heritage practices amid these pressures. By foregrounding gendered experiences, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of cultural preservation in a modernizing context and emphasizes women's agency in maintaining communal identity. Furthermore, the findings are intended to inform policymakers, cultural institutions, and community leaders, offering practical insights for supporting women-led heritage initiatives and ensuring the continued vibrancy and resilience of Bengal's coastal cultural traditions.

In sum, the coastal belt of Bengal stands as a vibrant testament to the ongoing dialogue between enduring cultural practices and the forces of modernization. Women, historically the stewards of communal heritage, occupy a pivotal role at this intersection, skilfully negotiating the preservation of tradition while engaging with the opportunities and challenges of a rapidly globalizing world.

Chronological Developments

Early Modernization: 1900–1947

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Bengal's coastal communities were deeply anchored in traditional practices, with women serving as primary custodians of cultural heritage. They transmitted oral histories, artisanal crafts, ritual practices, and culinary traditions across generations, ensuring the continuity of community identity. During this period, modernization began to permeate daily life under British colonial influence. Colonial administrators and missionaries introduced new educational systems and bureaucratic frameworks that, while aimed at societal "modernization," often disrupted indigenous cultural practices. Despite these changes, women's roles as cultural bearers remained vital, though largely confined to domestic spheres and largely unrecognized by formal cultural institutions. Modernization functioned not as a monolithic force but as a gradual process coexisting with traditional practices. Studies such as Binny's analysis of botanical knowledge networks highlight how local knowledge persisted and sometimes integrated with European scientific paradigms. In coastal Bengal, informal, gendered channels maintained by women continued to underpin cultural transmission, ensuring that indigenous practices survived even when official modernization narratives often overlooked their contributions.

Postcolonial Transition and Nation-Building: 1947–1960

The period following India's independence in 1947 marked a crucial turning point in coastal Bengal's social and cultural landscape. As the nation embarked on the task of nation-building, there was a renewed emphasis on reclaiming and preserving indigenous cultural heritage, highlighting the importance of local traditions in forging a distinct national identity. Women, long serving as custodians of folklore, artisanal crafts, culinary practices, and ritual performances, began to take on more active roles in these cultural revival efforts. The postcolonial government's focus on education, social reform, and community development gradually created avenues for women to participate in both formal and informal cultural sectors. Educational programs, vocational training, and engagement with social organizations enabled women to document, articulate, and preserve traditional practices while navigating evolving social roles. This period thus laid the groundwork for women's continued involvement in sustaining cultural heritage, balancing traditional responsibilities with the opportunities presented by a modernizing nation.

During these formative decades, modernization in coastal Bengal was marked by a tension between pursuing economic and political progress and preserving a distinct cultural identity. Women began to access formal education and training, which enhanced their capacity to document, articulate, and revitalize traditional practices, from folklore and artisanal crafts to ritual performances. At the same time, educational reforms and social policies aimed at modernizing the nation prompted a redefinition of traditional gender roles. Women were increasingly tasked with negotiating dual responsibilities: upholding inherited roles as custodians of culture while meeting new expectations as active participants in the modern nation-state. This period thus laid the foundation for ongoing debates on cultural authenticity and economic sustainability, positioning women as key agents of change. Their evolving roles during this era underscored the delicate balance between tradition and modernity, highlighting women's central contribution to the preservation and adaptation of coastal Bengal's cultural heritage.

Socioeconomic Transformation and Cultural Reorientation: 1960–1980

Between 1960 and 1980, Bengal underwent significant socioeconomic transformations as industrialization and urbanization accelerated modernization across the coastal region. Economic reforms, coupled with advancements in transportation and communication, reshaped local social structures and

disrupted traditional livelihoods. Market forces and state-led development initiatives posed unprecedented challenges to artisanal practices, particularly those maintained by women. Modernization offered new opportunities for formal employment and education, gradually expanding women's agency. However, the commercialization of crafts and cultural expressions often devalued their traditional methods, as efficiency, standardization, and mass production were prioritized over localized, artisanal techniques. Despite these pressures, women-led grassroots initiatives played a crucial role in sustaining cultural heritage. Informal networks and community groups actively preserved artisanal skills, folklore, and ritual practices that modern institutions often overlooked. These efforts highlight women's resilience and adaptability, demonstrating their continued role as custodians of cultural knowledge even amidst rapid socioeconomic change. The period thus reflects a complex interplay between modernization, economic transformation, and the persistence of traditional cultural practices through women's agency.

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

The economic liberalization of India in the early 1990s marked a new phase of globalization that significantly influenced coastal Bengal, bringing both opportunities and challenges for women involved in cultural heritage preservation. The expansion of global trade, intensified market integration, and rapid infrastructural development reshaped the region's socio-economic landscape, while urbanization and increased connectivity exposed traditional communities to modern economic and cultural pressures. Cultural commodification accelerated during this period, with local practices and artisanal crafts being packaged for domestic and international consumption. For women, this era offered new economic opportunities but also demanded adaptation to market-oriented production and consumer expectations. Research by Chowdhury and Bose demonstrates how women creatively modified traditional crafts to align with commercial demands while striving to sustain cultural authenticity. Simultaneously, environmental challenges, including coastal resource exploitation, added another layer of complexity, positioning women at the frontline of balancing ecological stewardship with heritage preservation. Between 1980 and 2000, state and local cultural policies began to formally acknowledge women's contributions, although economic priorities often overshadowed cultural continuity. Despite these constraints, community-led initiatives persisted, highlighting women's resilience and ingenuity. Studies by Rajarshi and colleagues underscore how women navigated the intersecting pressures of globalization, modernization, and environmental change, ensuring the continuity of coastal Bengal's cultural heritage while adapting to contemporary socio-economic realities.

The Digital Era and Contemporary Transformations: 2000–2020

Entering the new millennium, the rise of digital technologies and widespread internet access created transformative opportunities for cultural heritage preservation in coastal Bengal. Modernization during this period facilitated a unique convergence of traditional practices with advanced digital tools. Women increasingly leveraged these technologies to document, archive, and share local cultural expressions. Social media, digital storytelling platforms, and online marketplaces offered new channels for showcasing artisanal crafts, oral histories, and ritual practices that were previously restricted to local communities, enabling broader recognition and engagement while fostering innovative approaches to sustaining cultural heritage.

Sen's research highlights how women have skilfully navigated the digital landscape to reinterpret and revitalize their cultural heritage (Sen). Digital media has allowed them to archive oral histories, showcase local artisanship, and mobilize community resources for cultural conservation. Complementing this, Das argues that modern media platforms have enabled the creation of hybrid cultural narratives, blending

traditional practices with contemporary innovations, thereby expanding the possibilities for heritage preservation in coastal Bengal (Das). Together, these studies illustrate how digital technologies empower women to sustain and adapt cultural practices while fostering broader community engagement and intergenerational transmission.

Despite these opportunities, the rapid pace of modernization in the digital era has introduced significant challenges for women in coastal Bengal. Economic growth, urban expansion, and environmental exploitation increasingly threaten the cultural practices that women strive to preserve. Environmental degradation—driven by industrialization, climate change, and unsustainable resource extraction—has severely impacted coastal ecosystems, which form the foundation for many local traditions. Studies by Zuhdi and Sturman highlight how such disruptions undermine traditional livelihoods and cultural practices, placing added responsibilities on women who manage both cultural and natural resources (Zuhdi; Sturman). At the same time, the commodification of cultural heritage presents additional dilemmas. As local crafts and traditions are adapted for tourism and global markets, women face tension between maintaining authenticity and meeting commercial demands. Roy's research illustrates that while modernization provides new economic opportunities, it also pressures women to modify or simplify traditional practices to appeal to broader audiences (Roy). This tension underscores the complex interplay between cultural preservation and market forces in the modern era.

Synthesis and Contemporary Reflections

Over more than a century, the modernization of coastal Bengal has been a dynamic, multifaceted process 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 postcolonial nation-building, the economic liberalization era, and the transformative rise of digital technologies, women have remained central to sustaining cultural continuity. Their contributions have evolved in response to the pressures and opportunities of modernization. Initially informal and largely domestic, women's roles expanded alongside education, economic participation, and technological access, often negotiating tensions with modernist ideologies. They became not only preservers of tradition but also innovators, adapting cultural practices to new contexts and platforms. Navigating shifting gender norms, economic challenges, and environmental crises, women continually redefined their custodianship of heritage. This century-long narrative demonstrates resilience and adaptation, showing how women leveraged digital media, market initiatives, and community programs to sustain and reinvent cultural practices. It affirms their indispensable role in safeguarding coastal Bengal's cultural legacy for future generations.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that modernization has profoundly reshaped women's roles in preserving the cultural heritage of coastal Bengal between 1900 and 2020. Traditionally responsible for folklore, artisanal crafts, and oral histories, women have continuously adapted to shifts in socio-economic, environmental, and technological contexts. Colonial influences, postcolonial nation-building, and the rise of digital media have redefined their responsibilities, providing new avenues for cultural innovation and transmission. Despite challenges such as environmental degradation, urbanization, and the commodification of traditions, women have sustained resilient networks that uphold community identity and heritage continuity. Their evolving roles highlight the importance of policies that recognize and empower gender-specific contributions to cultural preservation. This research underscores the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity, advocating for inclusive strategies that maintain indigenous

practices while promoting women's agency. The findings emphasize the necessity of integrating gender perspectives into cultural policy and community development to ensure that coastal Bengal's cultural legacies remain vibrant and resilient for future generations.

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