



Research Article

Traditional Sports and Games Culture in Jangalmahal

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Abstract

The main aim of this article is to highlight certain distinctive and indigenous games prevalent in the Jangalmahal region, and to analyse how these games are intertwined with the daily lives of the people. Furthermore, it aims to illustrate the extent to which these local games serve as sources of entertainment versus how deeply they are rooted in the realities of everyday life. The traditional games of Jangalmahal serve as a true reflection of the daily life of its inhabitants. These games not only mirror their lifestyle and cultural heritage but also represent the region's unique geographical landscape. Consequently, the prevalent games of Jangalmahal are deeply rooted in the lives of its indigenous communities. The region's topography and the arduous struggles of daily existence are vividly reflected in these forms of recreation. Thus, various agrarian folk customs, religious rituals, and distinct cultural traits of the region are clearly manifested within its traditional games. Although advancements in information technology and the increased use of electronic devices - such as televisions, computers, and mobile phones have become widespread today, some of the traditional childhood games persist among the local children. Nevertheless, due to the relentless forces of modernisation and globalisation, the traditional games of Jangalmahal are gradually fading into oblivion. However, there is a glimmer of hope, as government initiatives are currently underway to preserve and revitalise some of these traditional games of Jangalmahal.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The 'Jangalmahal' region, a forest-clad tract in the western part of West Bengal, is primarily constituted by the districts of Purulia, Jhargram, Bankura, and Paschim Medinipur. For administrative and military considerations, the British government carved out a distinct district named 'Jangalmahal' from this forested territory. Established in 1805, this district comprised 23 parganas and mahals, including the area that constitutes present-day Purulia. Situated as part of the Chotanagpur Plateau, the district was characterised by dense forests, hills, and red laterite soil. The livelihood of the local population is predominantly dependent on the forests and agriculture. The struggle for survival is arduous for the indigenous communities (such as the Santhals, Mundas, Hos, and Bhumijis) and the various distinct tribal groups inhabiting Jangalmahal. As a means of recreation and leisure amidst this life of strenuous toil, specific sports and games have evolved that serve as expressions of courage, agility, and valour. For the people of Jangalmahal, these sports are not merely forms of physical exercise; rather, they constitute an integral and inseparable part of their religious rituals and social cohesion.

2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study was conducted with the following main objectives-

1. Highlighting some unique indigenous games prevalent in Jangalmahal.
2. To analyse the extent to which the indigenous games of this region are intertwined with its local traditions.
3. To demonstrate how these games differ from those found in other parts of the country and to analyze that the games prevalent here serve purposes beyond mere entertainment.
4. To highlight how the region's traditional games are gradually fading away due to modernisation, and to outline the initiatives undertaken by the government to preserve them.

3. METHODOLOGY OF STUDY

This study is based on both field study and interviews. Literary sources were done in various libraries, particularly the Purulia and Bankura district libraries. Interviews, folk songs, and folk culture have been collected from various villages in Jangalmahal as far as possible. Proper scientific research methodology, mainly the empirical and analytical methods, is employed for collecting data and for a proper analysis of them.

Major Traditional Sports of Jangalmahal :

Lathi Khela (Stick Fighting):

Lathi Khela is one of the most prominent traditional sports of Jangalmahal. This sport holds a significant place in the region's history; at one time, the *lathi* (stick) served as the primary weapon for the local people, whether to fight against British rule or to defend their settlements from wild animals. In this sport, participants wield their sticks while moving in a circular formation, keeping time with the rhythmic beats of

drums (*dhol* and *madal*). The performance showcases a variety of offensive and defensive techniques.

Lathi Khela is typically organised with great enthusiasm and popularity during festivals such as Muharram, Vijaya Dashami, and Neel Puja fairs.

Kara Lorai (Buffalo Fighting):

In the areas of Purulia and Jhargram regions falling within the geographical scope of Jangalmahal, *Kara Lorai* (or buffalo fighting) is an extremely popular and thrilling sport.

Typically, this sport involves pitting two powerful male buffaloes (*kara*) against one another in a head-to-head battle. The buffalo that retreats or flees the arena is declared the loser.

In this region, the sport is regarded by the rural populace as a contest of social prestige and honour. The owner of the victorious buffalo is accorded special honours and awarded prizes.

Morog Lorai (Cockfighting):

Rural marketplaces (*haats*) play a pivotal role in the daily lives of the people of Jangalmahal. These rural markets are typically held once or twice a week, most often on a weekly cycle. While these markets offer a diverse array of goods, one of their primary attractions is the sport of cockfighting.

In cockfighting, small, sharp blades known locally as *kati* are usually fastened to the legs of two fighting cocks. Although it is a blood sport, it serves as a major source of entertainment for the marginalised communities of the region. The sport also serves as a focal point for significant betting activity, which, in turn, exerts an influence on the local rural economy.

Garu Khuta (or the Sport of the Bandna Festival):

Garu Khuta is one of the distinctive traditional sports of Jangalmahal, particularly prevalent in the districts of Purulia and Bankura. Typically, during the *Bandna* festival, the indigenous people of this region engage in games involving cows or oxen.

In this game, a cow is tethered to a sturdy post and provoked using a dummy made of leather or cloth. This sport showcases a remarkable blend of animal agility and human courage.

Archery

The bow and arrow constitute an integral part of the indigenous society of Jangalmahal. Although historically a part of their hunting lifestyle, it has now evolved into a competitive sport.

In this region, archery competitions are frequently organised, particularly during the annual hunting festivals. The impeccable skill of hitting the target runs in the very blood of the people of this region.

The Pata Nach and Games of the Karam Festival:

Pata Nach is a popular game prevalent among women in the Jangalmahal region, particularly in the districts of Bankura and Purulia. Embedded within this game of *Pata Nach* lies a form of artistic exercise. The rituals observed during the Karam

Festival—specifically those involving the *Jawa grains* also incorporate various competitive elements.

Chhau Dance: Martial Arts in the Guise of Dance

It would be a mistake to label the Chhau dance of Purulia as merely a dance; it is, in fact, a martial art.

The somersaults, leaps, and sword-wielding postures observed within the 'sequences' or *palas* of Chhau dance are integral elements of ancient warfare techniques.

The Bankura Context: While Chhau dance is also practised in Bankura, it is the style originating from Purulia that enjoys worldwide acclaim.

Children of Jangalmahal and Their Games

Parents of Jangalmahal, just like any other parents, no matter how uneducated they are. They try to organise activities pertaining to games within very limited resources. Parents insist on their children playing outside the home. In a hot or cold climate in an open space, children jump, run, hide, and chase each other. Some games require a group of boys and girls, whereas others are played either by girls or boys only. Irrespective of the location chosen for playing, in a forest, on the street, in a courtyard or elsewhere. The games are designed to provide fun and help to inculcate physical and mental control among the participants.

Jhurul Jhap or Throw Stick:

One of the important sports in this region is *Jhurul Jhap* or Throw Stick. This game is mainly played by boys above 10 years of age, and the game consists of four to five players. One of them becomes the pot or the victim. The rest of the boys climb the tree, and one boy throws a stick nearby. The delinquent boy retrieves the stick and tries to touch a player on the tree. At this time, any player jumps from the tree before the delinquent player touches any player in the tree. If the delinquent player touches any player in the tree, then that player becomes the delinquent player. Thus, the game continues continuously.

Dang Gadagadi or Danguli

This *Dang Gadagadi* game is very popular in rural areas in this region. Two or more players play this game together. Each player needs a wooden stick to play this game, usually 24 to 30 inches in length and 2 to 2.5 inches in diameter. For this game, first a hole is dug in the ground about 4 to 6 inches deep. A player then puts his stick into the hole. If the other players can then use his stick to knock down the previous player's stick, that stick becomes his, and the player whose stick falls to the ground is out of the game. If his club fails to land, the next player tries. In this way, the game continues in stages. When a player knocks the sticks of the others to the ground, that player wins. The winning player then holds the sticks together and throws them away, and each player looks for his own stick and tries to get to the hole as quickly as possible. The potter who reaches the hole becomes the offender and has to place his stick in the

hole first, then the rest of the players try to drop the stick into the ground in the same way. Thus, the game continues.

Kabadi

This game of Kabadi is mainly played by boys who are physically fit and strong. The game is played between two teams, and each team consists of five to seven players. The game is usually played outside the village in an open space or field. The playing field is usually a square, 20 feet in length (although its length varies from region to region), divided by a line down the middle of the field, with two teams on either side of the line. Then a toss is held between these two teams to determine which team will attack first and the team that wins the toss attacks first against the opposing team. Then one of the players of that team crosses the control line or line while saying *Kabaddi Kabaddi* and touching the opposing team's players. Try and the opposition players try to catch him. If that player touches any player of his opponent's team, he is out of the game. The other team's players then attack the opposing team's players in the same way and try to touch their players. Thus the game continues. The team that touches all the players of the other team and knocks them out wins.

KIT- KIT

This *kit-kit* game is mainly played by girls and in this case two to three girls play together. For this game, first draw a square room on the floor with two rows and three pens to draw a picture. To play this game, you need a piece of stone or an opening that is two to three inches in size. First, a player stands on the stone with a piece or a piece of stone and throws the piece of stone into the first room of the picture on the floor. Then, tapping the piece of stone with one foot crossed the remaining rooms of the image and came to the first room. Then he picked up the piece of stone and threw it in the second room and kept tapping his feet and crossed all the rooms and came to the second room. Thus the game continues as per third fourth fifth

Luka-Chupi or Hide and Seek

Hide and seek is a fun game played by young boys and girls in this region. Mainly boys aged 5 years and above play this game with their friends. First a friend is asked to cover his eyes with his hand. Then the others all hide in front of each other. Then he starts looking for his friends in different places and if during this time other friends touch him, he has to close his eyes again for a while and the others hide and so on until the game continues until he finds someone. When he finds one he has to close his eyes and when the others hide he has to find the rest.

Goli/Marbel or Glass ball

A fun game in this region is playing marbles. This game of marbles is mainly played by five to eight year old boys with two or three of their friends. This game requires glass marbles. In this game each player has one shot. For this game, first a 1 to 2 inch hole is made in the ground. Then everyone stands at an equal distance from the hole and each throws his own marble

towards the hole and tries to get it into the hole. Then the person whose marble is in front of the hole tries to get his marble into the hole first by throwing the marble forward with the middle of the left hand and the knuckle of the right hand. Whoever gets his marble into the whole first wins.

Ghuriurano or Kite Flying

Kite flying is a very enjoyable sport for children of Jangalmahal. The little boys appear in the field with kites in groups, and then all fly kites, the higher the kite in the sky, the more joy he gets. They also started bickering over the kite flying incident and tried to cut off each other's watches and throw them to the ground. During this time those who are with him also enjoy a lot of joy.

Khelamkichu or Pittu

A delightful sport of this region is the *Khelamkuchi* game. This game is mainly played by young boys in an empty place in the village. This game is basically between two teams. First, a number of stone pieces or round pieces of terracotta are arranged in a row and placed in a triangular shape. Then both teams stand equidistant from the triangular piece of stone. Then one player of one team tries to hit the stone pieces with a ball (ball made of plastic or polythene). One player from each team or all gets a chance to hit a total of 3 times. If someone from the first team manages to hit then that team the stone pieces are arranged consecutively and try to keep them triangular as before. Then the players of the second team catch the ball and try to hit the players of the first team with the ball so that they cannot arrange the stone pieces as before. When the players of the second team hit which member of the first team after hitting, that player is out of the game. The game continues until the stone pieces have been arranged as before. They are an important vehicle for passing on some ancestral knowledge to the posterity. According to Edgardo Civallero - 'a people's intangible heritage is composed by the non-material part of this culture : tales and narratives, games and songs, music and all the knowledge usually transmitted by oral or sound means, in traditional societies as well as in urban westernized ones''.

The Social and Cultural Significance of Sports

The traditional games of the Jangalmahal region hold profound social and cultural significance. Among the games prevalent in this area, *LathiKhela* (stick fighting) and archery originally served as symbols of self-defence and valour. These practices emerged in the forested terrain primarily as a means for inhabitants to protect their lives from wild animals. Over time, however, these activities evolved into forms of leisure and recreation. Furthermore, the majority of the games in this region are intrinsically linked to seasonal transitions or agricultural festivals. Consequently, these games have significantly influenced the social fabric of the local population. Through these games, people from various villages gather at a common venue, thereby fostering and maintaining social harmony.

Current Challenges and the Path Forward:

Due to advancements in modern information technology and shifts in lifestyle, many traditional games of Jangalmahal are now on the verge of extinction. The Childhood games that were once commonplace are rarely witnessed today. This decline is largely attributed to the fact that contemporary parents are increasingly focused on providing their children with formal, conventional education. Within the context of a capitalist social order, parents driven by the desire to ensure their children's success and social standing have become more inclined to enrol them in English-medium schools rather than encouraging their participation in traditional sports. Additionally, animal-centric sports such as cockfighting and buffalo fighting are facing legal hurdles and restrictions following objections raised by animal rights organizations. However, there is cause for optimism: through government initiatives such as the 'Jangalmahal Cup' (featuring football and athletics competitions), efforts are underway to scout for rural talent; moreover, attempts are being made to preserve *LathiKhela* by elevating its status to that of a recognized folk art form.

4. CONCLUSION

The traditional games of Jangalmahal are not merely physical exercises; they represent a living culture of this forested region. These games remind us that when human recreation harmonizes with nature, it transforms into tradition. Preserving this sporting culture is essential for safeguarding our cultural identity.

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