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A Comprehensive Investigation towards the Women's Roles in Cultural Heritage Preservation: Modernization in Coastal Bengal (1900–2020)

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ABSTRACT: This study explores the impact of modernization on women's roles in preserving coastal Bengal's cultural heritage from 1900 to 2020. It examines colonial influence, postcolonial nation-building, socioeconomic shifts, globalization, and digital advancements in reshaping gender roles and traditions. Through archival research and literature review, the study highlights women's resilience in adapting to economic, environmental, and social changes. Despite challenges like environmental degradation and cultural commodification, women continue as key custodians of indigenous knowledge. Their efforts sustain community identity and cultural continuity. The findings provide crucial insights for policymakers in heritage conservation and gender-inclusive cultural policies.

KEYWORDS: Modernization; Women's Contributions; Heritage Conservation; Coastal Bengal; Indigenous Traditions.

I. INTRODUCTION

The coastal region of Bengal, with its rich natural beauty, vibrant cultural traditions, and strategic maritime significance, has long been a site where modernization and tradition intersect. Between 1900 and 2020, this region experienced profound socio-economic and environmental transformations that redefined the roles of women in cultural heritage preservation. As modernization introduced new technologies, economic structures, and social ideologies, traditional practices of cultural transmission faced both challenges and opportunities. This study explores how modernity has reconfigured gender dynamics and community practices in heritage preservation. Historically, coastal Bengal has been a melting pot of cultures, shaped by centuries of trade, migration, and colonial encounters. The region's engagement with colonial modernity and later national modernization efforts led to economic and political shifts that disrupted traditional gender roles. Women in coastal communities have historically been the custodians of folklore, artisanal crafts, culinary traditions, and religious rituals, acting as primary links between past and present. These practices were not merely domestic activities but vital expressions of communal identity. However, modernization brought rapid urbanization, industrialization, and environmental degradation, threatening these traditions. At the same time, technological advancements, education, and economic diversification provided new avenues for cultural preservation.

Modernization in coastal Bengal manifested through infrastructural developments, enhanced connectivity, and shifts in labour markets. The increasing participation of women in formal employment and education expanded their agency, though sometimes at the expense of traditional cultural roles. Studies on modernization's effects in other coastal regions suggest that such transitions can both marginalize and empower local actors. For instance, community-based initiatives, like mangrove restoration projects, have demonstrated how grassroots movements can preserve ecological and cultural heritage despite modern pressures. Economic globalization further shaped the region's transformation. Coastal Bengal has long been part of international trade networks, and modern industrial demands have intensified ecological disruptions, such as sand mining and resource extraction. Environmental degradation threatens cultural practices tied to natural landscapes, disproportionately affecting women, who manage household resources and maintain traditional agricultural and artisanal skills. Consequently, modernization is not just an economic or ecological concern but also a cultural one, influencing the very fabric of heritage preservation.

Additionally, modernization redefined social hierarchies within coastal communities. Research on ethnic diversity and resource competition in Bangladesh highlights how modernization can exacerbate conflicts while also fostering new cultural dialogues. In Bengal, traditional custodians of heritage, including women, have sometimes been marginalized by economic shifts favouring commercially viable models. This raises concerns about cultural sustainability and the recognition of women's roles as heritage transmitters. Another critical aspect of modernization is the commodification of cultural heritage. Traditional arts, crafts, and rituals are increasingly marketed to tourists and global consumers, balancing authenticity with economic viability. While commercialization offers financial benefits and global recognition, it also risks diluting cultural practices. Women, as key transmitters of these traditions, navigate this complex landscape, striving



to maintain authenticity while adapting to modern economic realities. Despite the extensive cultural heritage of Bengal, the specific impact of modernization on women's roles in preservation remains underexplored. While existing studies address artisan communities and environmental transformations, there is a critical gap in understanding how modernization has shaped women's agency in cultural sustainability. Through examining historical trends and contemporary case studies, this study aims to bridge this gap, offering insights into how women in coastal Bengal have negotiated their roles amidst modern socio-economic changes. Ultimately, understanding these dynamics contributes to broader discussions on sustaining cultural heritage in an era of rapid modernization.

II. FINDINGS FROM RELATED RESEARCH LITERATURE

The coastal region of Bengal, a dynamic fusion of tradition and modernity, has undergone profound transformations from 1900 to 2020 due to urbanization, technological advancements, and evolving economic structures. Central to these changes is the shifting role of women in cultural heritage preservation. Traditionally, women were custodians of artisanal crafts, oral traditions, and rituals, but modernization has both disrupted and redefined these roles. Colonial influences introduced administrative and economic changes that marginalized women's traditional contributions while also laying the groundwork for later empowerment. Pre-modern communities saw women as transmitters of cultural narratives and artisanship, yet modernization altered these frameworks. Research by Purwowibowo et al. on community-led conservation highlights the importance of traditional knowledge in addressing modern challenges, emphasizing the role women play in sustaining heritage.

Recent studies, such as those by Chowdhury and Bose, reveal that modernization has pressured coastal craft traditions, yet women have innovated to sustain them in competitive markets. Roy's research further suggests that modernization reconfigures gender roles, simultaneously empowering and commodifying cultural practices. Digital technology, as explored by Sen and Das, has enabled women to document and disseminate heritage through online platforms, preserving oral histories and artisanal techniques. Environmental degradation, driven by industrialization and resource extraction, threatens cultural traditions linked to nature. Zuhdi and Sturman examine environmental disruptions affecting maritime industries, highlighting the vulnerability of traditional lifestyles. Additionally, Kapadia's study on cultural commodification underscores the tension between economic viability and cultural authenticity. Despite these challenges, modernization has also created opportunities for women to redefine cultural custodianship. By integrating archival research, field studies, and case analyses, this study explores how women in coastal Bengal have navigated modernization while preserving cultural identity. Their evolving role reflects the broader struggle to balance tradition with the demands of a rapidly changing world.

III. CHRONOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN COASTAL BENGAL

- **Early Modernization: 1900–1947:** At the beginning of the 20th century, Bengal's coastal communities followed deeply rooted traditional practices, with women as key cultural custodians. They preserved oral histories, crafts, rituals, and culinary traditions. British colonial influence introduced new education and bureaucratic systems, which often undermined indigenous traditions. Although modernization coexisted with traditional practices, women's roles remained confined to the domestic sphere. While indigenous knowledge persisted, women's contributions were rarely recognized in formal institutions, highlighting a slow yet impactful transition towards modernization.
- **Postcolonial Transition and Nation-Building: 1947–1960:** India's independence in 1947 marked a shift toward reclaiming indigenous heritage. Women, long responsible for cultural preservation, actively engaged in cultural revival. Postcolonial education and social reforms provided new avenues for their participation in formal and informal cultural sectors. However, modernization redefined traditional gender roles, requiring women to balance inherited responsibilities with emerging societal expectations. This period laid the foundation for debates on cultural authenticity and economic viability, positioning women as key figures in cultural continuity and change.
- **Socioeconomic Transformation and Cultural Reorientation: 1960–1980:** Between 1960 and 1980, industrialization and urbanization reshaped Bengal's coastal region. Economic policies, transportation, and communication advancements disrupted traditional livelihoods. Women faced both opportunities and challenges—formal education and employment expanded their agency, but commercialization devalued traditional crafts. Market forces prioritized efficiency and mass production over artisanal methods. Despite these disruptions, grassroots networks, often led by women, sustained cultural practices. These community-led efforts ensured the survival of artisanal skills and rituals, despite their declining status in the modern economy.
- **Globalization, Liberalization, and Reconfiguration of Gender Roles: 1980–2000:** Economic liberalization in the 1990s brought both opportunities and pressures to coastal Bengal. Globalization led to cultural commodification, where traditional crafts were marketed commercially. Women adapted by integrating modern production techniques into traditional practices. However, environmental degradation and resource exploitation created new challenges. Despite market pressures, women continued preserving heritage through innovative approaches. While formal



policies recognized traditional knowledge, they often prioritized economic growth. Community-led initiatives, however, sustained cultural traditions, emphasizing women's resilience in adapting to modernization.

- **The Digital Era and Contemporary Transformations: 2000–2020:** The rise of digital technologies transformed cultural preservation in Bengal. Women used social media, online marketplaces, and digital storytelling to document and promote traditions. These platforms enabled broader cultural engagement, blending tradition with innovation. However, modernization also threatened heritage, as economic and environmental changes disrupted traditional practices. While digital tools expanded cultural visibility, market pressures forced adaptations that risked authenticity. Women navigated this evolving landscape, balancing cultural preservation with economic realities, demonstrating the complex interplay of tradition and modernity.

IV. SYNTHESIS AND CONTEMPORARY REFLECTIONS

Over the past century, modernization in coastal Bengal has continually reshaped women's roles in cultural heritage preservation. From colonial influences to postcolonial nation-building, economic liberalization, and digital transformation, women have remained central to cultural continuity. Initially confined to informal, domestic spheres, their roles expanded with education, economic shifts, and technology. Despite challenges like environmental degradation and cultural commodification, they adapted, innovated, and redefined heritage preservation. Through digital media and grassroots initiatives, women sustained traditions while integrating modern influences. Their resilience highlights the enduring power of indigenous knowledge, ensuring cultural heritage remains vibrant amid evolving societal landscapes from 1900 to 2020.

V. CONCLUSION

This study explores how modernization has reshaped women's roles in preserving coastal Bengal's cultural heritage from 1900 to 2020. Traditionally responsible for folklore, artisanal crafts, and oral traditions, women have adapted to shifting socio-economic, environmental, and technological contexts. While modernization introduced educational and economic opportunities, it also disrupted indigenous practices. Despite challenges like environmental degradation and cultural commodification, women remain key agents of heritage preservation. Their evolving contributions highlight the need for gender-inclusive cultural policies. This research underscores the importance of balancing tradition and modernity, ensuring sustainable cultural continuity while empowering women in heritage conservation efforts.

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