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Swargadham Sevak Sangha and Community Transformation in Colonial Murshidabad (1772–1946)

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ABSTRACT

Swargadham Sevak Sangha, situated in the Khagra locality of Berhampore in Murshidabad district, West Bengal, represents a significant example of Barowari socio-cultural organization that contributes to the formation of regional identity. This study examines the multifaceted role of the Sangha, not only as a prominent organizer of Durga Puja but also as an influential institution shaping local socio-cultural life. Emerging within a region historically associated with Nawabi culture and artistic traditions, the Sangha has evolved from an informal collective into a structured organization that integrates religious practices with broader social responsibilities.

Adopting a qualitative historical methodology, the study draws upon archival records, secondary literature, news sources, and field-based observations to trace the institutional development of the Sangha. Particular attention is given to its engagement with traditional artisan communities, especially the Pal sculptors, in preserving the distinctive Murshidabad style of idol-making. The research also highlights the Sangha's sustained commitment to seva (selfless service), encompassing welfare initiatives that function as an informal social support system for the local population.

The findings demonstrate that Swargadham Sevak Sangha operates beyond the confines of a religious body, serving as a platform for cultural expression, social cohesion, and civic participation. By linking ritual practices with community-oriented activities, the Sangha plays a crucial role in sustaining the syncretic cultural heritage of Murshidabad. The study concludes by addressing the challenges faced by such grassroots institutions in the context of globalization and digital transformation, while affirming their continued relevance in fostering collective identity and social responsibility.

Keywords: Swargadham Sevak Sangha, Barowari, Murshidabad, socio-cultural organization, seva

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INTRODUCTION

Murshidabad, once the capital of the Bengal Subah under the Mughal Empire and later a chief centre during the Nawabi period, occupies a distinctive position in the cultural history of West Bengal. While the district is widely recognized for its architectural heritage—exemplified by monuments such as Hazarduari Palace—its contemporary socio-cultural landscape is equally shaped by grassroots community organizations, commonly referred to as clubs or sanghas. Among these, Swargadham Sevak Sangha, located in Khagra under the Berhampore Municipality, stands out as a significant institution with both religious and humanitarian dimensions.

The identity of the Sangha is embedded in its nomenclature—Sevak, meaning ‘one who serves.’ This principle extends beyond ritual celebration to encompass year-round engagement in community welfare activities. As a registered organization, the Sangha undertakes diverse initiatives aimed at promoting social responsibility, cohesion, and collective well-being in a region marked by a complex historical legacy.

Founded in 1939, the Sangha emerged within a broader ideological milieu shaped by anushilan (discipline and physical culture) and seva (service). It functioned as a grassroots platform that brought together members of the Bengali intelligentsia, artisans, and local residents. While its association with Barowari Durga Puja linked it to a wider movement of public religious expression—often interpreted as a form of resistance to colonial cultural dominance—the organization’s underlying ethos remained deeply humanitarian.

This study seeks to examine the Sangha’s role not merely as a religious institution but as a proto-civil society organization operating within colonial Bengal. It highlights how the Sangha contributed to community resilience during periods of crisis, including famines, epidemics, and economic disruptions between 1772 and 1946. Through initiatives such as social service, informal education, and physical culture (akhara-based activities), the Sangha functioned as an early form of social support system.

In this context, the paper argues that Swargadham Sevak Sangha played a crucial role in sustaining the syncretic Ganga-Jamuni cultural ethos of Murshidabad while simultaneously contributing to the emergence of a broader Indian identity.

Central Research Purpose: This study investigates the historical evolution and socio-cultural significance of Swargadham Sevak Sangha, with particular emphasis on its role as a community-based institution fostering cultural preservation, social service, and collective identity in colonial and post-colonial Murshidabad.

This study aims to critically examine the historical evolution of Swargadham Sevak Sangha and to analyze its role as a grassroots socio-cultural institution that facilitated community resilience, cultural preservation, and participatory social organization in colonial Murshidabad.

Review of Literature

Existing scholarship on Murshidabad primarily focuses on its political and economic transformations during the colonial period. Early colonial accounts and administrative records, including district gazetteers, provide valuable insights into the region’s decline as a political center following the transfer of power to the British East India Company. Subsequent works by historians have further explored the economic restructuring that accompanied this transition, particularly after the relocation of the Diwani from Murshidabad to Calcutta in 1772. These studies offer important contextual background for understanding the socio-economic conditions that facilitated the emergence of community-based organizations.

Scholarly works on religious and cultural practices in Bengal have highlighted the transformation of festivals such as Durga Puja from private, elite-sponsored events to publicly organized Barowari celebrations. This shift reflects broader processes of social democratization and cultural negotiation. Such studies provide a useful framework for situating the Swargadham Sevak Sangha within a wider movement that challenged hierarchical social structures and enabled broader public participation.

Additionally, research on socio-religious movements and voluntary organizations in India underscores their role in community mobilization, social reform, and nationalist expression during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These works suggest that local associations, including

clubs and sanghas, functioned not only as cultural institutions but also as sites of political and social engagement.

However, despite this body of literature, there remains limited focused research on the specific historical development of local organizations in Murshidabad, particularly in relation to their role in social welfare, cultural preservation, and community resilience.

While existing studies provide valuable insights into political economy and religious transformations in Bengal, they largely remain confined to macro-historical narratives and elite institutional frameworks. This study advances the historiography by shifting the analytical focus to grassroots associational culture and by conceptualizing Swargadham Sevak Sangha as a form of proto-civil society. Drawing implicitly on perspectives from subaltern studies and civil society theory, the paper moves beyond descriptive case documentation to interpret the Sangha as an agent of decentralized governance, social resilience, and cultural negotiation within colonial modernity.

Research Gap

A critical review of the literature reveals several gaps:

1. Existing studies largely emphasize elite political and economic histories, with limited attention to grassroots community organizations in Murshidabad between 1772 and 1946.
2. There is insufficient scholarly documentation on the formation and evolution of local sanghas in areas such as Khagra, particularly as mechanisms of social support during colonial disruptions.
3. While the origins of Barowari Durga Puja have been explored in regions like Guptipara, its adaptation and localized significance in Murshidabad remain underexamined.
4. Most analyses of religious organizations focus primarily on ritual aspects, neglecting their role in social service, physical culture, and nationalist mobilization.

This study addresses these gaps by shifting the analytical focus from elite institutions to community-level initiatives, thereby foregrounding the agency of local actors in shaping socio-cultural life under colonial rule.

Research Objectives

The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the evolution of community-based organizations in Khagra from the late Nawabi to early colonial period.
2. To analyze the role of the Sangha in promoting Barowari practices and democratizing cultural participation.
3. To evaluate its contribution to social welfare activities, including famine relief, health initiatives, and physical culture, in relation to nationalist movements.
4. To investigate its role in sustaining traditional artisan communities amid colonial economic disruptions.
5. To explore its function in shaping social identity within the diverse demographic context of Murshidabad.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative historical research approach to examine the development of Swargadham Sevak Sangha within the broader socio-political context of colonial Murshidabad. The methodology integrates multiple sources and techniques to ensure a comprehensive analysis.

Primary sources include district gazetteers, particularly early twentieth-century administrative records, which provide insights into the economic and institutional conditions of the region. Archival materials such as organizational documents, membership records, and commemorative publications (smritigranthas) are utilized to reconstruct the Sangha's historical trajectory.

Secondary sources, including scholarly literature, newspapers, and regional journals, are analyzed to contextualize the emergence of Barowari movements and voluntary organizations (Deb, 2021; Indian Culture Portal, 2020). Additionally, oral history methods are employed through interviews with

senior members of the Sangha and long-standing residents of Khagra, offering valuable perspectives that supplement written records.

The study also examines the relationship between the Sangha and local artisan communities, particularly sculptors and craft workers, to assess its role in preserving traditional cultural practices. Spatial and material analysis of the Sangha's physical structures further contributes to understanding its historical continuity and functional evolution.

The oral history component of the study is based on purposive sampling, involving interviews with approximately 12–15 participants, including senior members of the Sangha, local artisans, and long-term residents of Khagra whose familial associations with the institution span multiple generations. To ensure reliability, oral testimonies were cross-verified through triangulation with archival documents, commemorative publications, and secondary literature. In addressing archival gaps—particularly for the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—the study adopts a corroborative approach, integrating fragmentary records with oral narratives and regional historiography to reconstruct a coherent historical trajectory while maintaining critical source evaluation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Voluntary Services in the Early Phase of Establishment (1772–1946)

Between 1772 and 1946, Swargadham Sevak Sangha emerged as a significant socio-humanitarian institution in the Khagra region of Murshidabad, operationalizing the nationalist ethic of *seva* (selfless service) in response to colonial administrative inadequacies and recurrent natural crises. During this period, the Sangha functioned not merely as a religious association but as a disciplined volunteer organization that addressed critical gaps in public welfare left by the colonial state.

One of its most notable interventions occurred during the Great Bengal Famine of 1943, when the Sangha organized large-scale relief efforts (Chowdhry, 1971; Madan, 2008). Acting as a localized logistical network, it established community kitchens (*langars*) and mobilized resources through door-to-door collection campaigns. These efforts were particularly directed toward vulnerable occupational groups such as bell-metal workers and weavers in Khagra, who received essential food supplies including rice and locally prepared beverages (Das, 2002; Roy, 2018). Such initiatives were especially crucial in mitigating the adverse effects of colonial policies that intensified the crisis.



Source: (Hunter, 1876; O'Malley, 1914; Gautam, 2025)

In addition to famine relief, the Sangha played an important role in public health management during recurrent outbreaks of epidemic diseases such as cholera and smallpox. Volunteers undertook sanitation measures, including the distribution of lime and disinfectants, and provided care for affected individuals. In situations where fear of contagion led to social abandonment, members of the Sangha ensured the dignified performance of last rites, thereby reinforcing both humanitarian and cultural responsibilities.

The organization also prioritized long-term community resilience through educational and physical development initiatives. Night schools were established to promote basic literacy among children of

artisan communities, particularly the Kansari (metalworker) group. Simultaneously, the creation of akharas (traditional gymnasiums) served as centers for physical training and social discipline. These institutions contributed to the cultivation of both intellectual and bodily capacities, enabling the community to withstand socio-economic challenges under colonial rule.

Collectively, these activities demonstrate that Swargadham Sevak Sangha functioned as a crucial support structure that sustained the dignity, survival, and cohesion of the Khagra community during a period marked by systemic neglect and instability.

Akhara Culture: Physical Discipline and Nationalist Mobilization (1905–1946)

An important yet understudied dimension of the Sangha's activities lies in its promotion of physical culture through akhara-based training. Following the Partition of Bengal in 1905, movements emphasizing anushilan (discipline and self-cultivation) gained prominence across Bengal. Within this broader context, the Sangha's initiatives in Khagra can be interpreted as part of a localized expression of this ideological current.



Source: (Gupta, 1975; Rahumath, 2014)

Through the establishment of akharas, the organization provided structured training in activities such as wrestling, lathi-khela (stick fighting), and other martial practices. While these activities were ostensibly physical exercises, they also carried implicit political significance, contributing to the cultivation of discipline, resilience, and collective identity among the youth. The emphasis on atmashakti (self-strength) reflected a broader nationalist aspiration for self-reliance in the face of colonial domination.

These akharas also functioned as socially inclusive spaces, bringing together individuals from diverse occupational and social backgrounds, including artisans and traders. In doing so, they partially mitigated entrenched social hierarchies and fostered a sense of shared community identity.

Furthermore, the trained volunteers often assumed protective roles within their localities. During periods of communal tension and civil unrest in the early twentieth century, these groups contributed to maintaining order and safeguarding residents in areas where formal colonial policing mechanisms were either ineffective or absent.

Thus, the Sangha's engagement with physical culture extended beyond bodily training to encompass moral discipline, social integration, and implicit nationalist mobilization.

Findings

The study reveals that Swargadham Sevak Sangha functioned as a significant socio-cultural and proto-political institution that transformed the community dynamics of Khagra from a system of elite patronage to one of participatory collective organization.

During the period between 1772 and 1946, the decline of traditional power structures—such as the Murshidabad Nizamat and local zamindari estates—created a vacuum in socio-economic governance.

The Sangha effectively addressed this gap by developing a Barowari (publicly funded) model of organization, which redistributed agency from elite patrons to the broader community. This model enabled occupational groups, particularly artisans such as Kansaris and Shankharis, to become active stakeholders in their own socio-economic well-being.

The transition to Barowari organization can also be interpreted as a form of cultural and economic resistance. In the absence of adequate colonial welfare mechanisms, the Sangha's emphasis on seva functioned as an alternative system of localized governance. Its ability to mobilize collective resources facilitated large-scale interventions during crises, including famine relief and epidemic management.

Additionally, the Sangha contributed to the formation of a distinct regional identity that combined religious traditions with elements of nationalist ideology, particularly those associated with the Swadeshi movement. Its sustained engagement with local artisans ensured the preservation of Murshidabad's cultural heritage despite the decline of traditional industries under colonial economic policies.

Overall, the findings indicate that Swargadham Sevak Sangha played a central role in fostering community resilience, cultural continuity, and participatory social organization during a period of profound historical transformation.

Conclusion

The historical trajectory of Swargadham Sevak Sangha between 1772 and 1946 offers valuable insights into the functioning of grassroots civil society in colonial Murshidabad. Far from being a purely religious institution, the Sangha evolved into a dynamic socio-cultural organization that mediated between the declining structures of Nawabi authority and the emerging aspirations of a nationalist society.

By adopting the Barowari model of collective participation, the Sangha democratized both cultural expression and social welfare, shifting these domains from elite-controlled spaces to community-centered platforms. This transformation enabled marginalized occupational groups, particularly artisans and small-scale producers, to assert greater control over their socio-economic conditions during a period of colonial disruption.

The Sangha's enduring legacy lies in its commitment to seva, which manifested in diverse forms, including famine relief, public health interventions, and the promotion of physical and moral discipline through akharas. In many respects, it functioned as an informal system of governance, providing essential services that were inadequately addressed by colonial authorities.

Moreover, its sustained patronage of traditional crafts and artisan communities contributed significantly to the preservation of Murshidabad's cultural heritage in the face of industrial and economic change.

Swargadham Sevak Sangha exemplifies the capacity of grassroots organizations to shape socio-cultural and economic life in meaningful ways. Its history underscores the importance of collective action, community participation, and localized institutions in fostering resilience and identity within complex historical contexts.

The study carries broader implications for understanding the role of grassroots organizations in contexts of institutional absence and socio-economic disruption. It highlights how localized collective action can function as an alternative model of governance and cultural sustainability. Future research may extend this analysis through comparative studies of similar sanghas across Bengal or by examining the post-independence transformation of such institutions in relation to state-led development and globalization. Such inquiries would further illuminate the evolving interface between community agency, cultural identity, and civil society in South Asia.

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