

# The Ramkeli fair and its potential contribution to the tourism of West Bengal

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**Abstract-** The Vaishnava Bhakti movement is a very significant chapter in the history of Bengal as well as India. The great saint and scholar, Sri Krishna Chaitanya spread the Vaishnava ideology of love for Krishna, ignoring caste, class and even religion. One of the milestones in this movement was the meeting of Sri Chaitanya with two government officials and brothers – Rup and Sanatan, who later became his disciples and contributed greatly to Vaishnava philosophy and literature. The meeting between the Guru and the disciples took place in secret at a place called Ramkeli near Malda Town. Today, this is commemorated by a temple where Vaishnava devotees, tourists and Kirtan artists come together every year in the middle of June in a week long fair. It is marked by modern attractions of any fair, but its exceptional feature is its emphasis on Vaishnava beliefs and Kirtan sung by various groups throughout the duration of the fair. This paper has examined the potential to develop Ramkeli as a major tourist attraction as well as a centre for study and research on Vaishnava culture.

**Keywords:** Ramkeli, fair, Vaishnava, tourists, Kirtan

## I. INTRODUCTION

The district of Malda is one of the oldest inhabited parts of West Bengal. Located in the central area of the state, the district extends from 24°40'20" N to 25°32'08" N and 87°45'05" E to 88°28'10" E. It shares an international border with Bangladesh in the east.

The earliest empire in Bengal had its seat in Malda. The area was then known as "Gour" after 'gur' or jaggery that used to be produced here. The most famous king was Sasanka. Since then, Malda has been the traditional seat of power. The Palas and the Senas had their capital here. They were followed by the sultanate. Malda continued to be the centre of political power till it was shifted by the Nawabs to Murshidabad. Such a long history has created some of the most fascinating sites and relics in the district.

The early 1500s saw the famous Bhakti movement which started in Bengal and spread to its surrounding areas. The famous Vaishnava saint, Sri Krishna Chaitanya, popularly known as Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, brought devotion out of the stronghold of the Brahmins and upper castes and spread the word of God to all. It was not merely a religious movement. It was a dynamic social movement as well. Sri Chaitanya recognised only Bhakti or intense devotion to Lord Krishna. He and his followers sang, danced and chanted the name of Krishna in their ashrams and on the roads of Bengal (Goswami, c 1582). Everybody was welcome to join the procession. The divides based on caste were completely ignored. At the height of discrimination and untouchability, the Bhakti movement re-energised the society and created a unity in the Hindu community that was previously unseen.

Sri Chaitanya travelled over many parts of India on foot, accompanied by his followers and he brought Bhakti wherever he went. He had also come to Malda. He rested at a place called Ramkeli, which is just outside Malda Town. Today, there is a temple here to commemorate his visit. Every year, a week long festival is held during the middle of June, celebrating the Bhakti movement. This is known as the Ramkeli fair. This paper seeks to examine this fair in detail and its potential to contribute to the development of tourism in Malda.

## II. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The small village of Ramkeli is located around 16 kms outside the Malda town which is the headquarter of the district of Malda. During the time of Sri Krishna Chaitanya, it used to be the capital of the Bengal Sultanate. At that time, Bengal was ruled by Sultan Alauddin Hussein Shah and his capital was in Gour. Ramkeli is famous because it is this place where Sri Chaitanya first met with Rup and Sanatan. They were

government officers under the sultanate who would become the leading followers of Sri Chaitanya and would later compose several important literary works.

Rup and Sanatan were two brothers who held important administrative posts in the court of the Sultan. Rup was known as Dabir Khas while Sanatan was called Sakar Malik. They were rich and powerful, but their social position was delicate as they were Hindu officials in Muslim court. Both the brothers had heard about the Bhakti movement and they developed great devotion to the Lord Krishna. In 1514 or 1515, Sri Chaitanya visited Ramkeli. Both the brothers met him here in secret (Das Thakur, 1535). Today, their meeting place under a *kadamba* tree is commemorated with a temple. Both became the disciples of Sri Chaitanya. Rup resigned his administrative post almost immediately. He gave away all his wealth, renounced his worldly life and joined Sri Chaitanya in his travels or Bhakti Yatra. However, Sanatan stayed back. He wanted to spread the message of Bhakti movement with the help of his administrative powers. But the Sultan grew suspicious of the growing influence of Sri Chaitanya among the common people. Eventually, Sanatan was arrested. However, he managed to escape. The brothers settled in Vrindavan and became two of the six Goswamis or leaders of the Vaishnava cult.

Though the philosophy of Sri Chaitanya was simple, he left no written treatise. Of the several Vaishnava scholars who wrote about his life and philosophy, Rup Goswami and Sanatan Goswami were the foremost. Rup Goswami wrote *Bhakti Rasamrita Sindhu* while Sanatan Goswami is best known for *Hari Bhakti Vilasa*. The two scholars also contributed to the *Rasa Sahitya*, which forms the foundation of Vaishnava philosophy. (Biswas, 2025)

Ramkeli gained a special status among the Vaishnava devotees. This is where the philosophy of love and devotion to God met with scholarly abilities. The Guru met with his future disciples, who would later codify his teachings. The ancient tree under which the secret meeting took place is said to be still standing. It is regarded as a holy site. A bond between the Hindu and Muslim society was also created here. Vaishnavas regard it as a sacred place where worldly power and riches submitted to divine power. To commemorate this meeting, which also marked the beginning of the

spread of the Bhakti movement beyond Bengal, a fair is held every year at the time of the meeting. This is one of the largest Hindu fairs and is extremely important for the Vaishnavas. One of the most important characteristics of this fair is that a three to four day long Kirtan festival is held here at that time. This has kept alive the tradition of Kirtan from the time of Sri Chaitanya.

Fig. 1. The temple at Ramkeli



Source: Photo by researcher

Fig. 2. The meeting between Sri Chaitanya and Rup and Sanatan Goswami



Source: Photo by researcher

### III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of this study are:

- Describe the importance of Ramkeli fair and its potential for tourism.
- Analyse the characteristics of the tourists visiting the fair
- Identify the problems and propose an overall plan for developing tourism around the Ramkeli temple and fair.

#### IV. DATE BASE AND METHODOLOGY

Information about Ramkeli, its importance in history and the Bhakti movement have been collected from books and the internet. Early Vaishnava literature and books on the life of Sri Chaitanya have provided information on the importance of Ramkeli in the

Bhakti movement. Primary data has been collected by survey of twenty tourists who visited the fair as well as with the main priest of the temple. Secondary data has been collected from publications and website of the Government of West Bengal, Department of Tourism. Basic statistical and cartographic methods have been used to analyse the data.



Fig. 3: The Ramkeli Fair



Source: Photo by researcher

#### V. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TOURISTS VISITING THE RAMKELI FAIR

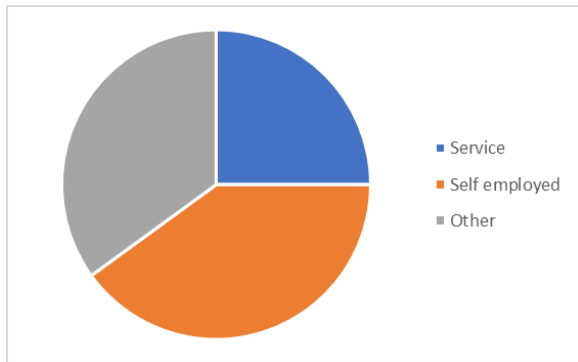
In the second week of June, a week long fair is held in Ramkeli in memory of the sacred meeting between Sri Chaitanya and Rup and Sanatan Goswami. It is very popular with the local people. Vaishnavas from all over the state come here at this time. Regular Pujas are offered. Several stalls are set up. In addition to the common attractions of a fair, certain items important to the Vaishnava Bhakti movement are often available in this fair. As a result, the Ramkeli fair has a significant scope of being developed as a tourist resource.

Primary survey of twenty selected visitors to the Ramkeli fair showed that about 70% of the respondents were male and the rest were female. The fair is popular with families, but not so much with the young people. 40% of the respondents belonged to age group 25 to 36 years. Younger people were few and generally a part of family group. The Ramkeli fair is a serious affair, commemorating an occurrence of historic and philosophical importance. Hence, it is more visited by the true Vaishnavas and devotees, rather than the pleasure seeking tourists.

The crowd visiting this fair differs from the ordinary crowd of any fair as seen by the educational characteristics of the respondents. More than 60% are graduates while the rest have completed higher secondary education. This event is not for the illiterate or the unaware. It requires a modicum of knowledge to come and take part in the Ramkeli fair. This same trend is observed when we analyse the occupational structure of the visitors. 40% are in service and 25% are self employed. The rest includes mostly homemakers while we encountered one person who has come to the fair to specifically participate in the week long Kirtan festival, or the festival of devotional song of Vaishnavas.

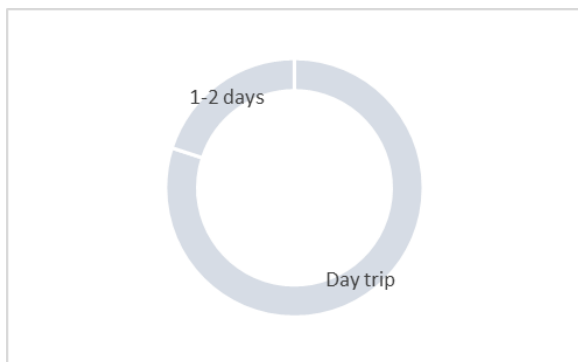
80% of the respondents said that they were travelling with their families while the rest have come alone. This also demonstrate that Ramkeli fair is friendly and safe for families to visit. 75% of the respondents said that they have come to this fair for the first time. Among the rest, most have come for the second time, but a few come every year to enjoy the kirtan festival that is an integral part of the fair. However, most are day visitors and only 15% plan to stay overnight at Ramkeli or in Malda Town and visit the fair on another day.

Fig. 4: Occupational structure of visitors at Ramkeli Fair



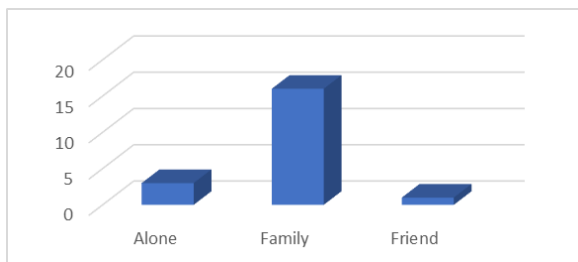
Source: Primary data

Fig.5: Duration of stay at Ramkeli by tourists



Source: Primary data

Fig. 6: Tourist groups at Ramkeli fair



Source: Primary data

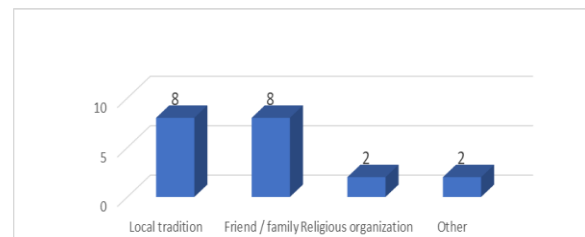
While tourists were reluctant to answer questions related to income and budget, it was inferred that they come mostly from lower middle class families and do not intend to spend any substantial fund on this outing. However, there are a number of stalls which sell items like pictures and books related to Sri Chaitanya, Vaishnavism and the Bhakti cult. Shops sell Puja items. Musical instruments typically used by the

Vaishnavas are common. Mementoes of Malda district are another popular item, often purchased as gifts. Hence, a bustling bazaar does a brisk business in Ramkeli for the duration of the fair.

#### VI. THE PERCEPTION OF THE TOURISTS

The visitors to the fair were asked several questions regarding the potential of the Ramkeli fair to develop as a tourist resource. The main attraction of the fair for all the respondents is the religious connotation of the place. Hence, a knowledge of Vaishnava culture and devotion is the main characteristics of the visitors. However, few visitors responded that they have other reasons, in addition to religious devotion. Some have come as a part of family outing. A small percentage claimed that they want to enjoy the culture of the fair. 20% of the visitors cited the main attraction as food, shopping and photography.

Fig. 7: Source of information about the fair available to the visitors



Source: Primary data

The visitors to the fair were asked several questions on the different aspects like cleanliness, safety, organization etc. Most tourists have no complain regarding the organization, the religious ceremonies, cultural performances and safety and security at the fair. The transport facilities are also said to be plentiful and frequent. However, when it came to the infrastructural facilities, the fair did attract criticism. Almost all female respondents and many male respondents pointed out the lack of proper toilet facilities. Drinking water was also not easily available, unless one was willing to buy it from the stalls. It has been seen that most visitors are elderly. But there are almost no resting ground or seating arrangements for people of that age.

The tourists had two major complaints about the arrangements at the Ramkeli fair. One is regarding the cleanliness of the place. Malda is a dry place and the

fair takes place at the height of summer. The influx of so many people create an enormous pressure on the environment and the water resource of the area. Hence, dust is common. While facilities are provided, they are not clean and very little effort is made in maintaining them.

The second major drawback was the lack of parking facilities. The village of Ramkeli is located around 16 kms from Malda town. Hence, many people come here on bikes or rented cars. But there are neither enough space, nor a well regulated system of parking the car and being assured of its security. This problem can seriously hinder the attraction of the Ramkeli fair.

#### VII. COMMON PROBLEMS AT THE RAMKELI FAIR

Personal observation by the researcher as well as interview of the visitors helped to identify the following problems of the Ramkeli Fair for developing as a major tourist attraction:

- Perhaps the greatest problem is the lack of publicity and information. Only people who are deeply involved in the Vaishnava culture and the tradition of Kirtan are aware of the significance of the temple of Ramkeli and the annual congregation to celebrate the Bhakti movement. (Paul and Londhe, 2024). The publicity depends mostly on word of the mouth and the knowledge of local people. Since it is a spontaneous fair, it is never advertised. Even in the social media, very few blogs or videos are available of the fair.
- The poor infrastructure is another shortcoming in developing fair centric tourism in Ramkeli. While the temple is of moderate size, well maintained with basic facilities, there are no facilities of rest, drinking water or toilet. The kirtan artists and Vaishnava devotees who come to attend the fair often stay in temporary camps or at Malda Town. Though ample space is available, there are no accommodation facilities at Ramkeli.
- Though there is huge potential, the cultural attractions of the Ramkeli fair are limited. Kirtan by the various groups are the highlight of the fair. However, there does not seem to be any fixed schedule. Several visitors to the fair were interested in listening to kirtan but they regretted that no schedules are available. As a result, they

may have come at the wrong time and missed the program. The program itself seems to be organized rather haphazardly with no clear itinerary of when each group would put up their performances and how long will it take. Even if there is some plan, it is not disclosed to the visitors earlier. As a result, the full enjoyment is denied and it becomes difficult to plan a visit to the fair.

- Several visitors pointed out that Vaishnava culture is rich in many other traditions which could be showcased in this fair but are sadly ignored. They said Baul songs, *kathak* narration about the life of Sri Chaitanya, discourses on Vaishnava philosophy etc are absent, but this would have been the best place and time for these performances.
- There are no first aid tent, police helpdesk or any visible arrangement for safety, security and maintaining the order and cleanliness of the fairground. The involvement of the local government is minimal. There is also severe lack of parking space – a matter of real concern to people who come here by the means of private transport.

#### VIII. SUGGESTIONS TO IMPROVE THE TOURISM EXPERIENCE AND VOLUME AT THE RAMKELI FAIR

Ramkeli fair has tremendous tourism potential, though it suffers from a few drawbacks. Some of these include the complete lack of publicity, availability of scant information on the internet, difficulties of transport, the rather unorganized structure of the fair and the fact that it takes place when the heat of summer is at its peak. Still, it has tremendous cultural and spiritual significance. This can be used to promote tourism in Malda centred around this fair.

Some steps which can be taken to realize the tourism potential of Ramkeli fair are as follows:

- The importance of Ramkeli has been stated several times in different Vaishnava literature. Its religious significance cannot be ignored. The Bhakti movement reached an important milestone at this spot with the meeting between Rup and Sanatan with Sri Chaitanya. The government can set up a Vaishnava culture centre here. This place is ideal for an institute which will carry out

research and studies on one of the most important chapters of the history of Bengal. This will attract students and scholars. There is indeed a huge scope of setting up a Vaishnava culture centre here. Such an institute is not present in a major scale anywhere in the state. The legacy of the Bhakti movement has long been ignored. It requires proper study and research. The literary leadership have long been provided by the Goswamis of Vrindavan. The Institute here can set up ties with the traditional institutes of Vrindavan so that the scholars of Bengal get encouraged to research deeply into the Bhakti movement and the contemporary society.

- The Vaishnava Bhakti movement gave rise to the unique tradition of Kirtan. It is one of the most revered intangible cultural resources of West Bengal. It began as simple chanting of Lord Krishna's name, but later evolved into a school of music with its own instruments, style and lyrics. Kirtan is not properly preserved or studied. Today, it remains confined to the few devout Vaishnava groups. It is of greatest significance to preserve this and carry out the necessary compilation and codification. The distinguishing feature of the Ramkeli fair is the kirtans performed by the various groups over a period of seven days. Hence, it is the best place where a research institute cum museum can be set up showcasing the kirtan style, its traditional instruments and its history. A permanent shop can be set up as a part of it where books and literature related to the famous artists, the history of kirtan, the instruments etc can be sold. Audio recordings of kirtans and music related to Sri Krishna Chaitanya as well as Baul music can also be sold here. The place has a commercial as well as cultural opportunity which is not being exploited to its fullest extent at this time.
- The government is in the process of building a small guest house for the Kirtan artists who come to the fair. However, the facilities are very minimum and should be increased. Proper maintenance is necessary.
- Local administration and police should be deeply involved in project Ramkeli to provide a safe, clean environment so that people who come here can not only enjoy themselves, but can also

recommend this place to their friends. Tourism still flourishes on word of the mouth which largely depends on the personal experience of the tourists.

- One of the problems stated by the visitors is that the place is not suitable for children. Since it is a region of religion and culture, there is little entertainment for the children. But unless they are adequately occupied, Ramkeli will fail to attract family groups. As an alternative, a small park can be set up with children's amusements like a swing and a slide. However, maintenance is the key factor here. The place is actually a village and there is almost no greenery. As a result, heat and dust are two major problems. The local administrative body must take active steps to create a green and clean environment. Pathways should be created and trees should be planted. Dustbins and toilets should be provided. Drinking water facilities, first aid and resting area are a must. A sort of cultural village can be built up. Plaques should be put up throughout to indicate the historical importance of the area.
- The final suggestion come from the visitors themselves. Many of the respondents said that if there were an app to disseminate information, learn about the programs and facilities in the fair, information about the weather and plenty of photographs and reviews, it would have been much easier to organize the visit. The Tourism Department of West Bengal need to take up this project. In this era of digitization, people always first look at their cell phones for information. Presence of apps, vlogs, photos, videos and reviews can go a long way towards popularizing the Ramkeli fair.

## IX. CONCLUSION

The district of Malda is rich in culture and history. It is also famous for the production of mango and silk products. Hence, there is huge potential to develop tourism in the district, provided the safety, security and border tensions are brought under control. The Ramkeli fair can play a truly significant role in the all round development of tourism in Malda district. In addition, it can emerge as one of the most important centres of Vaishnava learning, culture, history and music in the country.

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