

Ritual Recitations: Language Competence, Performance, and Cultural Survival in South Bengal's Mangal-Kāvya

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Abstract

This paper examines the pivotal role of oral tradition in preserving linguistic and cultural identity through an in-depth study of the *Mangal-Kāvya*s of South Bengal. As ritualistic narrative poems extolling local deities, the *Mangal-Kāvya*s serve not only religious and devotional functions but also act as living repositories of vernacular language forms, indigenous worldviews, and collective memory. Focusing on the dynamics of ritual recitation, the paper explores how these performative practices maintain language competence among communities, particularly in rural Bengal, where oral culture continues to mediate knowledge and social values. By analyzing key examples such as the *Chandī-Mangal* and *Manasā-Mangal*, the study highlights how stylistic features—like rhythmic repetitions, formulaic expressions, and dialogic structures—enhance both the memorability and transmissibility of the texts.

The paper critically reflects on the socio-cultural contexts in which the *Mangal-Kāvya*s are performed, demonstrating how oral performance transforms static literary texts into dynamic communal events. These performances not only reinforce language skills across generations but also create spaces for negotiation between tradition and evolving cultural identities. In an era of linguistic homogenization and cultural standardization, the ritual recitation of the *Mangal-Kāvya*s embodies a subtle yet powerful form of cultural resistance and resilience. The study further argues that orality is not a mere pre-literary residue but an adaptive, creative force that ensures the survival of marginalized languages and traditions.

Through an interdisciplinary approach combining literary analysis, performance theory, and linguistic anthropology, this paper sheds light on how the *Mangal-Kāvya*s continue to sustain the cultural fabric of South Bengal. By preserving oral traditions, communities assert their right to linguistic and cultural self-definition, highlighting the enduring relevance of ritual performance in the struggle for cultural survival.

Keywords: Oral Tradition, Mangal-Kāvya, Language Competence, Ritual Performance, Cultural Survival, Linguistic Anthropology

A language is not just words. It's a culture, a tradition, a unification of a community, a whole history that creates what a community is. It's all embodied in a language. (Chomsky, *We Still Live Here: Âs Nutayuneân*)

Oral literature functions as a vessel of collective memory, and language is central to its transmission. Stories, songs, and chants carry a society's values, beliefs, and histories across generations. Far from being neutral, language in this tradition is layered with cultural meaning and embedded in specific contexts. As Walter Ong notes in *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, oral cultures rely on mnemonic patterns—such as rhythm, formulaic phrasing, and repetition—to retain and convey knowledge. For example, African oral traditions often feature tonal nuances and structured patterns that highlight the musicality and embodied quality of the spoken word.

Integral to oral literature is its performative nature. As Richard Bauman argues in *Verbal Art as Performance*, oral narratives unfold through live interaction. The storyteller does not merely recite but enacts the tale through gesture, voice, and engagement with listeners. Language, therefore, becomes a performative tool—dynamic, responsive, and shaped by the immediate context. This improvisational aspect allows variation without undermining tradition, making oral literature a living, evolving art form co-created with the audience.

Beyond narrative expression, language in oral traditions plays a crucial role in shaping identity. Postcolonial critics, especially Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in *Decolonising the Mind*, highlight its political significance. Language acts as a bearer of cultural memory and worldview. Colonial suppression of native languages led to the erosion of oral practices and indigenous epistemologies. In response, many communities have reclaimed their linguistic heritage, using oral literature in native languages to assert autonomy and resist cultural domination.

Moreover, oral literature embraces multiplicity through its use of layered and open-ended language. Multivocality and polysemy are inherent features—especially evident in proverbs and riddles—which allow for multiple interpretations based on context. This interpretive openness ensures relevance across different audiences and time periods. The adaptive nature of language in oral traditions also means that stories evolve, integrating new idioms and references that reflect changing social realities. Such transformation resists fixed authorship and emphasizes the collective nature of creation and preservation.

As oral works are transmitted across generations, their language naturally evolves. Shaped by shifting social realities and linguistic trends, oral texts absorb new expressions, reshaping their form without losing their core essence. This adaptability not only preserves their relevance but also challenges traditional notions of authorship and textual fixity. In this way, the language of oral literature reflects the collective, fluid, and transformative nature of the tradition itself.

The Mangal-Kāvya (literally "auspicious poetry") refers to a prominent genre of

Bengali narrative verse that flourished between the 13th and 18th centuries. These compositions celebrate the power and benevolence of regional and folk deities, reflecting both religious devotion and the social landscape of the time. The term "Mangal" is rooted in the belief that hearing or reciting these verses brought divine favour, ensuring both spiritual merit and worldly prosperity. These texts played a vital role in shaping medieval Bengali literary culture, showcasing the deep integration of popular faiths and vernacular expression.

While many of these narratives circulated orally for generations, they were only later compiled in written form—often not until the 18th or 19th century—highlighting the performative and communal nature of the tradition. Among the most renowned strands of this genre are *Manasā Mangal*, *Chandī Mangal*, and *Dharma Mangal*, each exalting a major indigenous deity—*Manasā* (serpent goddess), *Chandī* (warrior goddess), and *Dharma Thakur* (a syncretic village god), respectively. These deities are among the most venerated figures in the folk religious imagination of South Bengal.

Alongside these major cycles, a variety of lesser-known *Mangal-Kāvya*s emerged, such as *Annadā Mangal*, *Śiva Mangal* (or *Śivāyana*), *Kālikā Mangal*, *Rāy Mangal*, *Śāṣṭhī Mangal*, *Śitalā Mangal*, and *Kamalā Mangal*. Each tradition was typically shaped by multiple poets or singer-poets (*gayens*), who were usually devotees of the deity they praised, offering localized renditions of the divine narrative. As T.W. Clark observes, these poets were often composing from memory and legend, recounting rituals and mythologies from centuries before their own time, rather than describing contemporary religious practices.

The *Mangal-Kāvya*s are notable for their vibrant blending of the sacred and the secular. While they recount the blessings and exploits of deities, they are equally rich in depictions of everyday rural life, social customs, economic activities, and human emotions. Critics such as Sukumar Sen have noted in his *History of Bengali Literature* that the *Mangal-Kāvya*s offer a social encyclopaedia of medieval Bengal, preserving glimpses of agrarian society, caste dynamics, and local traditions otherwise absent from court chronicles.

The central argument of this paper is that the survival and transmission of *Mangal-Kāvya*s are fundamentally tied to the ritual recitation practices that constitute their primary mode of dissemination. These performances—often occurring in religious festivals, seasonal ceremonies, and communal gatherings—function not only as aesthetic expressions but as acts of cultural continuity, wherein the competence of language is exercised, tested, and transformed within specific social, spiritual, and embodied contexts.

Performance has always been central to the *Mangal-Kāvya*s. The traditional performer, often known as a *gayen*, would sing or chant the verses, sometimes accompanied by music and dramatization. This oral mode of transmission emphasized language competence — the ability to recall, adapt, and perform vast narratives in a manner suited to varying audiences. Moreover, the performances

were inherently dialogic, frequently involving audience participation, call-and-response techniques, and improvisation based on local contexts. Noted theoretician Richard Schechner emphasized that performance is not merely a cultural display but a ritual enactment of social reality. In his words, ritual and theatre exist along a shared spectrum of repeated, structured actions. In the context of Mangal-Kāvya, each recitation becomes a ritualized speech act, reaffirming the cosmic and communal order while simultaneously negotiating local tensions, uncertainties, and desires.

Similarly, Judith Butler's concept of performativity—originally applied to gender—helps frame the ritual reciter's identity as an ongoing performance, where the performer's legitimacy arises from iterative enactments of cultural authority. In this view, language competence is not a static possession but a relational, embodied skill shaped by participation in culturally sanctioned acts of speaking. These ideas challenge the Western logocentric model, which privileges written text over orality and grammatical mastery over contextual fluency.

To complement these insights, Dell Hymes' influential notion of communicative competence provides a linguistic anchor. Hymes, countering Chomskyan formalism, argued that true language knowledge involves knowing when to speak, what to say, and how to say it appropriately in social situations. This is precisely what Mangal-Kāvya performers exhibit: a mastery over intonation, gesture, metaphor, and rhythm that aligns with ritual occasion and audience expectation. Their "competence" cannot be measured by literacy or grammatical precision but by effective participation in oral traditions.

Linguistically, the *Mangal-Kāvyas* are marked by their dynamic use of Bengali. They move seamlessly between Sanskritized diction and colloquial speech, reflecting the linguistic diversity of South Bengal. As scholar Edward C. Dimock points out, the *Mangal-Kāvyas* exemplify an inclusive vernacularism, capable of embracing both sacred grandeur and rustic intimacy. This fluidity of language allowed the poems to resonate across caste, class, and regional boundaries, enabling them to become a shared cultural resource.

In this light, the Mangal-Kāvyas do not merely survive as leftovers of an oral past but thrive as living texts, re-created in each recitation. The oral transmission of these texts is neither passive memorization nor mechanical reproduction. Instead, it constitutes a fluid, improvisational process that allows for adaptation, localization, and cultural negotiation. This understanding aligns with Ruth Finnegan's work in *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context* (1977), where she argues that oral poetry should be seen as a dynamic cultural practice, not an inferior counterpart to written literature.

Language competence in the *Mangal-Kāvyas* is multi-dimensional. It requires not only the ability to recite lengthy verses but also the skill to adapt speech according to context, audience, and emotional tone. For example, in *Chandī-Mangal*, composed by Mukundaram Chakravarti in the 16th century, the narrative voice

effortlessly moves between high Sanskritic descriptions of the goddess Chandī's grandeur and the earthy, humorous dialogues between fishermen and farmers.

In one passage, goddess Chandī says in a colloquial tone,

*Ki aar jigyaasa koro, ailang tomar ghor
birer dekhite nari dukh
Dia aamar dhon, tusib birer mon
aaji hoite boro pabe sukh. (Sen 59)*

What more is there to ask? I have come to your home.
I cannot bear to see the hero's sorrow.
Take my wealth — may it please the hero's heart.
From today, you shall find great happiness. (Self Translation)

The passage reflects regional linguistic variety through expressions like "*ailang*" (I have come) and "*tusib*" (please), showcasing dialectal Bengali rooted in oral traditions. Colloquialisms enhance emotional immediacy and reflect local speech rhythms, conveying intimacy, humility, and cultural context. This informal register deepens the connection between speaker and listener, grounding the verse in lived, vernacular experience. This switching is not merely stylistic; it mirrors the multilingual and socially layered world of medieval Bengal, where Sanskrit, Prakrit, and regional dialects coexisted. Performers of the *Mangal-Kāvya*s — often *gayen* or local priests — had to master these linguistic codes to engage audiences ranging from the rural peasantry to the Brahmin elites. Their competence lay in blending sacred and secular registers seamlessly, thus preserving both high literary forms and folk vernaculars within a single performance.

The oral recitation also demanded mnemonic mastery. Rhythmic meters such as *payar* (a couplet form) and *tripadi* (three-line verse) made the verses easier to remember and perform. For instance, a typical *payar* meter from *Manasā-Mangal* might go:

*Sādhite bisham kāj, Monsār nāhi lāj,
Debakanyā hoilen nañī.
Kāñākāñi kore debe, Monsā ki kore ebe,
Chañdikā hāsen khaṭkhaṭi. (Gupta 91)*

To accomplish a difficult task, Manasa feels no shame;
The daughter of the gods has turned into a dancing girl.
The gods whisper among themselves, wondering what Manasa will do now—
And Chandika laughs aloud with a rattling sound. (Self Translation)

The metrical regularity and musical cadence of such lines allowed even semi-literate performers and audiences to internalize complex narratives with ease.

As Walter J. Ong suggests in *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (2002), oral cultures develop memory techniques and linguistic patterns suited for oral retention and creative improvisation. The *Mangal-Kāvya*s embody this principle: performers did not merely memorize texts verbatim; they adapted stories to the local setting, inserting familiar names, local references, or current events.

Thus, language competence also meant possessing a creative agency over the text, reworking it without breaking its traditional structure.

Through these performances, young members of the community acquired language not in abstract classroom settings but through immersion — learning narrative structure, prosody, metaphor, and dialogue organically. As a result, the *Mangal-Kāvya*s nurtured a vibrant "living grammar," where language rules were embedded in cultural practices rather than written codes. In today's rapidly standardizing linguistic landscape, the *Mangal-Kāvya*s remind us of an alternative model of language learning — one rooted in creativity, community, and performance.

The survival strategy provided by the *Mangal-Kāvya*s is also visible in their role as a form of resistance against pre-colonial, colonial and later post-colonial cultural hegemony. Between the 12th and 15th centuries, Bengal witnessed a significant political shift when Turkish forces under Bakhtiyar Khilji defeated the Sena ruler Laxmana Sena and established Muslim rule. Historians attribute this defeat, in part, to the Senas' close alliance with the Brahmins, which alienated the lower castes who had long suffered neglect and oppression under their rule. The change in power disrupted the dominance of the upper castes in matters of religion, culture, and literature. As a result, folk beliefs, local rituals, and oral traditions began to flourish. In this new social landscape, the *Mangal Kavyas* emerged to meet the spiritual and cultural needs of the marginalized. These texts resonated with communities who had been subjected to exploitation not only by the incoming Muslim rulers but also by their previous native overlords. During the British colonial period, formal education systems and the imposition of English as the medium of instruction led to the decline of regional languages and indigenous forms of knowledge. In this context, the *Mangal-Kāvya*s offered a space where indigenous linguistic traditions could be upheld outside the reach of colonial institutions. The resilience of the *Mangal-Kāvya*s in preserving local languages, dialects, and religious practices therefore represents a kind of cultural resistance, where oral traditions subvert the erasure of local heritage by dominant forces.

In *Manasā Mangal*, attributed to poets like Vijay Gupta, Bipradas Pipilai and Ketakadas Kshemananda, the goddess Manasā demands recognition from Chand Saudagar, a powerful merchant who refuses to worship her due to her lowly origin. His repeated defiance leads to the destruction of his ships, the death of his sons, and immense suffering. It is only when Behulā, his daughter-in-law, embarks on a ritual journey, singing praises of Manasā and enduring physical and spiritual trials, that the goddess is finally appeased. In performance, this narrative becomes a ritualized act of cultural assertion. Manasā, often linked with tribal and non-Brahminical roots, is elevated to divine status through communal recitation, especially in monsoon festivals like *Nag Panchami*. Behulā's lament, sung with pathos and rhythmic intensity, allows rural women—often excluded from scriptural discourse—to identify with her suffering and resilience. The embodied performance of Behulā's plea becomes a gendered survival strategy, reaffirming

both female endurance and the spiritual legitimacy of folk deities.

Chandī Mangal, composed by poets such as Mukundaram Chakravarti and Dwija Madhab, recounts the goddess Chandī's miracles and her interactions with devotees like Kalketu and Dhanapati. Kalketu, a low-caste hunter, becomes a devotee of Chandī and is rewarded with divine blessings, wealth, and honor. His rise challenges caste hierarchies and affirms the goddess's inclusivity and preference for sincere devotion over ritual orthodoxy.

In village festivals such as *pala gaan* or *mangal gaan*, Kalketu's story is frequently brought to life through performance, celebrating his modest beginnings and divine rise with communal pride. The ritual recitation emphasizes the legitimacy of subaltern experience, turning the act of listening into a participatory affirmation of local values. The performance becomes a site of cultural negotiation, where lower-caste communities see their myths and heroes acknowledged within the sacred frame of devotional narrative. Here, Chandī's endorsement of a forest-dweller as her true devotee reinforces the vernacular principle that piety is measured by faith, not birth. Such recitations, performed in regional dialects with musical instruments like *khol*, *ektara*, and *dhol*, reaffirm communal values in the face of Sanskritic exclusion.

Dharma Mangal, a text associated with poets like Rupram Chakrabarty, is centered around Dharma Thakur, a syncretic deity worshipped by lower castes and tribal communities in Bengal. Dharma embodies elements of Buddhism, Shaivism, and local animism, making him a figure of religious hybridity. The narratives often depict conflict and resolution between Dharma and Brahminical forces, suggesting an ongoing negotiation between folk and elite religiosity.

In ritual performance, Dharma's stories are sung during *Gajan* festivals or household worship ceremonies. The recitation is accompanied by dance, music, and visual iconography (like clay images and sacred symbols), creating a sensorial environment of belief. These performances not only preserve localized myths but also act as a resistance to homogenizing religious discourses.

For example, in one episode, Dharma appears in disguise to test a Brahmin's arrogance, rewarding a poor devotee instead. The moral is clear: ritual purity and caste privilege are no match for devotion and humility. The performance thus affirms egalitarian spiritual ethics, offering marginalized communities a sacred space to assert their worth and worldview.

Through this performative act, the *Mangal-Kāvya*s preserve a diverse linguistic ecosystem that is increasingly under threat. In the modern era, dialects and regional forms of Bengali face extinction due to the dominance of standardized, academic Bengali. However, during *Mangal-Kāvya* performances, these dialects are not just preserved but celebrated. A performer might use a particular regional form of Bengali to evoke local customs, traditions, and shared histories. The audience, too, actively participates in shaping the performance by reacting, adding their own

proverbs, or even joining in the chant. This participation reinforces the idea that language is communal, living, and embedded within the collective memory of the community.

The *Mangal-Kāvya*s are also a battleground for cultural politics. In an era marked by linguistic standardization and the domination of formal education, these oral traditions resist the pressures of hegemonic forces by preserving regional dialects, local idioms, and folk expressions. The *Mangal-Kāvya*s, composed in early Bengali, are a direct counterpoint to the Sanskritized Bengali that became the norm in literary and religious texts. For example, in the *Chandī-Mangal*, the *gayen* (performer) would often recite lines in colloquial Bengali, enriching the narrative with local expressions and dialectical variations that reflect the lived experiences of the community.

In one section of the *Chandī-Mangal*, the goddess is invoked with the line:

*Suno bhai sabhajan kobitwyer biboran,
ei git hoilo jemote
Uria Mayer bese Aashia shiyar dese
Chandika basilo Achimbite. (Sen 2 pada 5)*

Listen, brothers all — this is a tale of poetry,
How this song came to be.
Flying in the guise of a mother, Coming to the side of head
Chandika suddenly took her seat. (Self Translation)

This mixture of high and low registers, blending Sanskritic and colloquial Bengali, underscores the ability of *Mangal-Kāvya*s to preserve the vernacular even within a religiously elevated context.

Another illustrative example from the *Manasā-Mangal* that showcases the characteristic blending of high and low linguistic registers.

*Netar haate Padmavati paiya upodesh.
Prabhat samaye Padma dhare natir besh.
Sahaje nagini Padma nana maya jane.
Taal yantra Gandharvabba daak diya ane.
Sangbad pathaiya ane dui Vidyadharī.
Tribhuban moho jaay paramasundarī.
Padmar bisham maya jane kon jan.
Sarbaang bhoriya pore nag-abharan. (Gupta 91)*

Padmavati, receiving advice from *Neta*.
At dawn, Padma assumes the guise of a dancing girl.
By nature a serpent-woman, Padma knows many enchantments.
To the beat of rhythm instruments, she summons the Gandharvas.
She sends messages through two Vidyadharis.
Her supreme beauty captivates all three worlds.

Who truly knows the fierce illusions of Padma?
Her entire body is adorned with serpent ornaments.(Self Translation)

The Sanskritic terms ‘Upadesh’ (advice), ‘Tribhubana moh’ (beauty that enchants the *three* worlds), ‘Nāg-ābharaṇa’ (Serpentine ornaments) juxtaposed with the regional colloquial tone of ‘naṭīr beś’ (The guise of a dancing girl) ‘sahaje nāginī’ (Naturally a female serpent). This juxtaposition is emblematic of how these texts function as cultural intermediaries, preserving sacred language while also making it accessible to the rural communities that perform them. The passage exemplifies the fusion of high Sanskritic and low vernacular registers, central to the *Mangal-Kāvya* tradition. This stylistic blending serves not just poetic ornamentation, but also fosters accessibility, emotional resonance, and cultural continuity for a diverse audience. The divine thus becomes both cosmic and earthly, remote and intimate, sacred and spectacular.

The *Mangal-Kāvyas* use vivid imagery and local dialects to evoke a communal sense of divine arrival. In *Dharmamangal*, a notable instance of cultural convergence is depicted toward the conclusion of the narrative. The central figure, Laosena, finds himself repeatedly urged by his maternal uncle, Mahamad, to commit acts of aggression. However, divine intervention comes through Dharmathakur, the guardian deity of Laosena, who ultimately curses Mahamad with leprosy. Interestingly, it is the same deity who later cures Mahamad at the compassionate plea of Laosena. While one may interpret Laosena’s actions as evidence of his nobility, such a reading risks oversimplifying the intricate socio-cultural dynamics at play. The episode subtly reflects a blending of cultural spheres—where Mahamad, a royal advisor from the court of Gour, embodies a more cosmopolitan identity, and Laosena, the son of the regional lord Karnasena of Maynangarh, represents a localized feudal culture. Their interaction highlights the negotiation between broader imperial ideologies and vernacular traditions.

The politics of language within the *Mangal-Kāvyas* can also be viewed through the lens of social stratification. While these texts are written in the vernacular, they often depict a hierarchical worldview where different classes and castes play distinct roles. The performance of the *Mangal-Kāvyas* in the community involves a ritualistic reaffirmation of these social structures, but it also subtly challenges them. For instance, the role of the *gayen*, typically a lower-caste performer, is essential to the transmission of the tradition, even though their social status is often marginalized in other contexts. In this way, the *Mangal-Kāvyas* serve as a site where caste hierarchies are both reinforced and, in subtle ways, questioned. The *gayen*’s power to shape the performance, to reinterpret the text based on audience reception, and to incorporate improvisational elements into the narrative, underscores their role as a subaltern figure who holds linguistic and cultural authority within the ritual performance. As Gayatri Spivak questions in *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, whether the subaltern can enter discourse, the *Mangal-Kāvya* tradition answers affirmatively: they can speak, and they do—through song, myth, and ritual.

However, like many oral traditions across the world, these texts face significant challenges in the modern age. The survival of the *Mangal-Kāvya*s in their authentic form is increasingly threatened by a range of factors, including the rise of modern education systems, the decline of traditional performance spaces, and the pervasive influence of globalization. One of the most immediate challenges to the survival of the *Mangal-Kāvya*s is the decline of traditional spaces where these rituals were once performed. Historically, *Mangal-Kāvya*s were recited in rural villages during important festivals or seasonal events, often within the context of communal gatherings. The performances took place in open spaces, such as courtyards, under the shade of large trees, or at the village temple. These performances were central to the social and cultural life of the community, often drawing in people from different walks of life, from the elderly to children.

However, with the rapid urbanization of South Bengal, many of these rural villages have either transformed into urban centers or have witnessed a drastic reduction in the number of people involved in these traditional activities. As urban spaces continue to expand, the demand for such rural traditions has diminished, and the rituals associated with *Mangal-Kāvya*s are increasingly confined to smaller, more private settings, often stripped of their communal essence. Critics such as P.K. Majumdar argue that the absence of these traditional settings contributes to a slow erosion of the *Mangal-Kāvya*s' cultural significance and public role (*Folk Literature and Performance in Bengali Culture*, 1998). In many rural areas, the younger generation is more likely to embrace modern forms of entertainment, such as television and digital media, than participate in or even attend a traditional *Mangal-Kāvya* performance. Consequently, the *gayens* (performers) are facing a dwindling audience, resulting in fewer opportunities to pass on the tradition.

The modern rise of standardized Bengali and the influence of English have led to the erosion of local dialects and, in some cases, the loss of the language competence required to fully appreciate or perform these texts. As the Bengali language becomes increasingly Sanskritized in formal contexts, the local dialects that characterize the *Mangal-Kāvya*s are fading from use. For instance, the kind of rustic dialect found in the *Manasā-Mangal* is rarely spoken in contemporary urban Bengali society. Critics like Shankha Ghosh highlight how the homogenization of language, driven by educational institutions and mass media, has led to the alienation of younger generations from their linguistic heritage (*Bengali Vernaculars and Folklore*, 2015). In one performance of the *Manasā-Mangal*, a *gayen* might chant a verse in a dialect that includes words like “patua” (a term for a local craftsperson) and “baba” (a familiar term for father or elder), which are increasingly unrecognizable to younger urban audiences. As these terms fade from the everyday lexicon, the original meaning and impact of these texts may be lost.

Globalization has had a significant impact on many traditional art forms, including the *Mangal-Kāvya*s. The commodification of culture, facilitated by mass media and digital platforms, has turned these once-sacred and ritualistic performances

into entertainment products. While digital recordings and performances may increase exposure, they often strip the ritual and communal context that gives the *Mangal-Kāvya*s their significance. The process of turning these performances into marketable content risks diluting their cultural and linguistic integrity.

A critical voice in this regard is that of Abhijit Guha, who points out in his book *The Commodification of Bengali Folk Art* that the commercialization of folk traditions often leads to their simplification and distortion. As traditional performances are adapted for mass consumption, they may lose their authenticity and the intricate rituals that once accompanied them. The *Chandī-Mangal*, for instance, has been adapted into a “fusion” form, incorporating modern instruments and singing styles. While this has made the text more accessible to younger, urban audiences, it has also altered the traditional melody and rhythm patterns that were integral to the ritual experience.

Despite these challenges, the future of the *Mangal-Kāvya*s is not entirely bleak. There are significant efforts being made to adapt these traditions to contemporary realities while maintaining their cultural essence. Scholars and folklorists are working to document and archive these oral texts, ensuring that they are preserved for future generations. Additionally, some cultural organizations and local communities are finding ways to reintegrate *Mangal-Kāvya*s into modern settings, such as festivals, religious gatherings, and educational programmes. In 2019, a digital archive of *Mangal-Kāvya*s was launched in Kolkata, which includes both recorded performances and scholarly annotations. This initiative aims not only to preserve these texts but also to reintroduce them to modern audiences in a way that respects their cultural and linguistic roots.

The *Mangal-Kāvya*s of South Bengal offer an extraordinary testament to the enduring power of oral traditions, communal memory, and the intricate relationship between language, ritual, and cultural identity. So, it becomes evident that the survival of the *Mangal-Kāvya*s is not merely a literary concern, but a broader cultural, linguistic, and political one. These ritual recitations have for centuries acted as repositories of collective wisdom, expressions of spiritual and social values, and living grammars of vernacular Bengali. They are, at once, deeply local and profoundly universal, offering insights into how communities use language and performance as strategies for resilience, survival, and self-definition.

Looking to the future, it is imperative that any strategy for the preservation of the *Mangal-Kāvya*s takes into account not just the texts themselves but the broader ecosystems of performance, community participation, and linguistic diversity that sustain them. Simply archiving the texts in written or digital form, while valuable, cannot replace the vibrancy of live recitation and communal engagement. Efforts should be made to encourage local performances, integrate the *Mangal-Kāvya*s into school curricula, and use modern platforms to disseminate performances that remain true to the tradition’s performative roots.

Moreover, there needs to be an emphasis on linguistic inclusivity. Instead of

pushing for a sanitized, standardized version of the *Mangal-Kāvya*s, efforts should celebrate and preserve the regional dialects and variations that give these texts their character. Linguistic diversity must be viewed not as an obstacle but as an asset — a testament to the rich, pluralistic heritage of Bengal. In this regard, folklorists, linguists, cultural historians, and community members must collaborate to ensure that the tradition remains a living, breathing entity.

The cultural politics surrounding the *Mangal-Kāvya*s also demands critical reflection. The tradition has historically been associated with lower caste and marginalized communities who used these narratives to assert their presence within the religious and cultural mainstream. As South Bengal — and India more broadly — grapples with questions of caste, identity, and cultural ownership, it is crucial to recognize and honor the subaltern roots of the *Mangal-Kāvya*s. Efforts to preserve the tradition must be sensitive to these dynamics, ensuring that the communities that have historically nurtured the *Mangal-Kāvya*s are not displaced or rendered invisible in the process of cultural preservation.

To safeguard the future of the *Mangal-Kāvya*s, we must move beyond nostalgia or passive admiration. We must recognize these traditions as living archives of collective experience, worthy of critical engagement, thoughtful adaptation, and communal celebration. In doing so, we not only honor the past but also carve pathways for a more inclusive, diverse, and culturally vibrant future. The survival of the *Mangal-Kāvya*s is, ultimately, a reflection of our commitment to preserving the many voices, languages, and stories that constitute our shared human heritage.

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