
**A Study on the Cults of Indra and Hudumdeo in Bengal:
Do These Have Vedic Roots?**

Sebak Biswas¹

¹Independent Researcher

Jalpaiguri, West Bengal,India

Email Id: sebakbiswas123@gmail.com

Abstract: *The Cults of Indra and Hudumdeo in Bengal are now almost obsolete. But in the past, these two traditions of worship were widely prevalent among the people. The worship of Indra in the festival of Idu Pooja is nothing but the continuation of the ancient festival of Indra Dhwaja, which is constantly mentioned in the ancient scriptures. An interesting feature of the Idu Pooja is the use of sal trees. It is believed that the tradition of Idu Pooja may have been a tribal festival that was adopted by the Aryans. Metaphorically it also represents the victory of the gods over the demons, which may be interpreted as the victory of Aryans over the non-Aryans. The cult of Hudumdeo is likewise a non-Aryan practice. Most peculiar feature of this cult is the dance of undressed women in the dark to please or frighten the rain god for ending drought. It is thought that Hudumdeo is a folk god representing the Vedic gods Indra or Varuna. The association of Hudumdeo with the Vedic gods Indra and Varuna was perhaps a later development which was introduced to make the rites more acceptable to the Aryan society as the latter have taboos regarding the participation of women in religious rituals.*

Keywords: *Hudumdeo, Indra Dhwaja, Idu Pooja, non-Aryan, Varuna, Sal tree etc.*

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Introduction

In Bengal, the cults of Indra and Hudumdeo are not so important in modern life. But in the distant past, these two traditions were widely practiced by people in different parts of Bengal. These traditions have an intimate connection with the nature worship of the Vedic Aryans and tribals. A festival named Indra Dhwaja was performed by the Zamindars and Rajas of

A Study on the Cults of Indra and Hudumdeo in Bengal: Do These Have Vedic Roots?

Rarh Bengal. It was a ceremony that symbolized the victory of the gods over the demons. Additionally, it was also performed to end droughts and bring rain. Though this festival is celebrated only by the traditional ruling classes of the society, common people also take part in the celebrations. A remarkable feature is the participation of the tribals in the Indra Dhawaja festival. It is believed that the festival may have its origins in the tribal world, and at a much later time it was appropriated by the Aryans and local chieftains. Another such tradition is the worship of Hudumdeo, which was practiced by the Rajbanshis and other communities in different parts of Bengal. This worship is variously linked with the Vedic gods Indra and Varuna, both of whom are invoked for rain. Hudumdeo is also a rain god who was invoked by women in a vulgar dancing ritual performed in a secluded place. Accordingly, it is presumed that its origin lies in the Vedic Aryans' worship of Indra and Varuna. Detailed empirical investigations into the origin and significance of these two traditions are lacking. These two traditions are mostly folk cults, and their characteristics vary from region to region. The present study is aimed at looking into the various aspects of these two traditions, with special emphasis on their Vedic linkages.

The Worship of Indra in Bengal: Origin and Symbolism

In Bengal, the worship of Indra is performed at the festival of Indra Dhawaja. Apart from Bengal, it is also celebrated in different parts of India. It is an ancient festival of Indra's flagstaff that may have its roots in the Vedas. The festival is referred to by various names, such as *Indra Dhawaja*, *Indra Maha*, *Sakra Maha*, *Sakrarcha*, *Indrotsava*, *Indradhvajotsava*, and *Indradhvaja-ucchraya*. In Bengal, it was known as *Idu Pooja* or *Ind Parb*, but it is now obsolete. The festival was widely celebrated in Medinipur, Bankura, Birbhum, Burdwan, and Purulia districts of West Bengal. But it was in Jhargram in Medinipur and Bishnupur in Bankura where this festival was celebrated with great pomp and grandeur. Here, a large number of tribal people also participated in the festivities. In Dhalbhum, which is now a part of the Bankura district, the Indra festival was celebrated by the king in the month of August. As reported by L.S.S. O'Malley (1910, 214–15), the king of Dhalbhum raised an umbrella to the top of a big pole of *Sal* wood; it remained erected in an open ground for nine days; on the tenth day the pole was brought down and submerged in the water. In Bishnupur, this festival,

A Study on the Cults of Indra and Hudumdeo in Bengal: Do These Have Vedic Roots?

as argued by Dasgupta et al. (2009, 15), corresponds to the annual ceremony of the starting of the *Mallabda* or Malla calendar and also to the annual function of the king's coronation ceremony. It is to be noted here that the Malla Era was started by the king Adi Malla of Bishnupur, whose coronation to the throne may have happened on the *Indra Dwadashi* day of the *Bhadra* month in the year 695 CE (Mallik 1921, 82). This *tithi* marks the beginning of the *Mallabda*, and coincidentally, it is the very day on which the Indra Festival is performed. Thus, the argument of Dasgupta et al. seems to be valid. There are two probabilities: either the Indra Dhwaja festival may have begun with the introduction of the Mallabda in 695 CE or the coronation of Adi Malla may have happened on the day of the Indra Dhwaja festival. More research is needed to support either of the two statements.

Another theory suggests that the worship of Indra's Flag-staff had its origins in the primitive traditions of pillar worship that were practiced by the non-Aryans. Tapashi Ghosh (2003, 76) argued that the cult of pillar worship was adopted by the Aryans after they defeated the former. She opined that Indra is the king of all gods and the umbrella is a royal symbol; therefore, the Indra Dhwaja festival must have been a tradition recording an ancient event when the Aryans defeated the non-Aryans in battles. The use of the *Sal* tree, as argued by Ghosh, also suggests that the worship may have been adopted from the tribals. The tribals of Eastern India even today worship the Sal tree with great devotion and respect. This tradition of Sal worship is also separately evident in Hinduism. However, religious texts and archaeological evidence suggest that not just Hinduism but also Buddhist and Jain mythological traditions imposed divine properties on Sal trees. The earliest mention of the sal tree can be found in the *Mahabharata* (Levman 2021, 163). The *Brihat Samhita* of Varahmihira declares sal wood as auspicious and recommends its use for beds, seats, etc. (Chowdhury et al., 150). The *Mahaparinibbana Sutta* says that Buddha died while lying between two sal trees (Duncan 2015, 3). The Jaina scripture *Acharanga Sutta* records that Mahavira got enlightenment under a sal tree (Price 2010, 82). The Oraons of Bengal believe that the Sal grove is the residence of Sarna Burhi, a popular deity who has some influence on rain (Porteous 2002, 123; Frazer 1900, 211; Dalton 1872, 221). The Bagdi and Bauri tribes of Bengal are wed in an arbor made of the branches of the Sal tree (Hewitt 1894, 153). Therefore, it is clear that the Sal tree has been a matter of reverence not just to the Hindus but also to the Buddhists, Jains, and tribals. In fact, it seems quite acceptable that the Indra

A Study on the Cults of Indra and Hudumdeo in Bengal: Do These Have Vedic Roots?

Dhwaja was actually, as Swarupa Gupta (2009, 300) argued, a non-Aryan practice that was Aryanized. Gupta says that the non-Aryan tree worship was transformed into the Aryan Indra Dhwaja festival. However, no direct evidence is there to support these claims, and the issue regarding the origin of the Indra Dhwaja remains a mystery.

The Indra Dhwaja worship was performed on the day which has *Shukla Dwadashi* and *Shravana* constellations in the month of *Bhadra*. In a few places, it was also performed in the month of *Asara*. The performance of this festival, as Barun Kumar Chakraborty (1984, 25) opined, was very expensive, and only a few Zamindars and landlords were wealthy enough to perform such highly expensive rituals. Prior to the designated day, on the day of *Radha Ashtami*, the king and/or the king's officials go to the forest, worship Bana Devi, or the Forest Goddess, and choose two to three sal trees, which are subsequently cut down and brought to the palace. One trunk was reserved for the rituals performed in the home, and the other was for the open-ground ceremony outside the home. On the designated day, these were raised like lingams, the biggest trunk was decorated with cloth, and an inverted umbrella-like bamboo casket was placed at the top of the shaft. It was believed that the trunk belonged to the god Indra, while the rest of the trunks belonged to his aunt (Basu 1978, 113).

The king and his family were instructed by the priests to be on a vegetarian diet fifteen days before the day of the Indra Dhwaja festival. One day prior to the date of the festival, the two sal trees were placed in a tilted position on a pole that was also made of sal wood. This was done during the night, and the whole ritual is known as *Adhibasa* and *Adhagachhi*. On the day of *Shukla Dwadashi*, the two trees were covered by clothes and worshiped. After propitiating, five members of the king's family circumambulate the trunks. The persons include the king, queen, priest, and two other members of the king's family. The king and queen do circumambulation in a palanquin. After this, the king and queen, with other people present at the time, make the tree stand straight from a tilted position. After doing the rituals, the king and queen took their seats, and people greeted them with presents and blessings. The tree stood in this position for nine days, and after that, it was immersed in a pond.

The rituals performed in the Indra Dhwaja have different meanings and significance. It has been already mentioned that the tribals worship the sal tree with great devotion and respect. The use of the sal tree in the Indra Dhwaja indicates that the tribal worship of the sal tree was absorbed into Aryan culture, and the Dhwaja or flag attached to it signifies the

A Study on the Cults of Indra and Hudumdeo in Bengal: Do These Have Vedic Roots?

victory of the Aryans over the non-Aryans. This becomes clear from the fact that the tribals living in the adjoining areas of the southern part of West Bengal flock in large numbers to the festival of Indra Dhwaja. There are numerous festivals that Bengalis perform throughout the year. Only in this festival is it seen that the tribal people participated wholeheartedly. This leaves no room for doubt that it has its roots in tribal culture.

The festival of Indra's Flag-staff was primarily performed for protection and prosperity. It was believed by the organizers of the festival that the performance of the Indra worship would bestow prosperity on them. If, during the worship ceremony, rain occurs, it is believed that the aunt, most probably Indra's, is crying. In fact, the intention of the dance and music in the festival is, as Chakraborty (1984, 27) opined, to bring rain. Locals believe that being pleased with the dance and music makes the rain god Indra come down from heaven and bring rain. This perhaps indicates an aspect of fertility that is associated with the cult. This aspect cannot be ignored because it was a custom among the tribals to place small branches of the sal tree in their farmland on the day of Indra Dhwaja to protect the land from evil spirits. These small branches of sal trees are known as *Id Dang*. The dance, music, and also the *Id Dang* clearly indicate that in earlier times the Indra Dhwaja may have been performed for protection and fertility of the land.

The Indra Dhwaja or Id Pooja is performed in different parts of Bengal, and accordingly, it is known by different names. It is variously known as *Chhata Parab*, *Indi Parab*, *Indibhuter Pooja*, etc. Officiating priests popularized the fact that the Id Pooja originated from the ancient Indra Dhwaja festival. This seems correct, as we find numerous references in Indian scriptures to the festival of Indra Dhwaja, in which similar rites and rituals are seen. The Indra Dhwaja is also known as the *Vishnu Dhwaja*, as it was first established by Vishnu for Indra (Dange 1986, 77). The earliest reference to Indra's worship, as shown by V. Raghavan (1979, 119), is found in *Rigveda* I.10.1, where Indra is said to be praised and raised high, like a bamboo pole. The *Satapatha* and *Jaiminiya Brahmanas* mention a pole, or *Danda*, by which the demons were kept off and prevented from obstructing the rites. The *Kaushika Sutra* of the *Atharvaveda* and *Atharva-Parisistas* describes a fully developed *Indra-Maha* festival. In the *Mahabharata*, the king of Chedi country, Uparichara Vasu, is said to have received a bamboo staff as a gift from the god Indra, which was worshiped by Vasu. Indra made a proclamation that those who will worship

A Study on the Cults of Indra and Hudumdeo in Bengal: Do These Have Vedic Roots?

the Flag-staff as Vasu has done will also become happy and prosperous like him (Agrawala 1970, 50). The Flag-staff was decorated with five-coloured strips of cloth and flowers. In the *Brihat Samhita* of Varahmihira, it is said that the *Indra-yasti*, or Indra's Flag-staff was decorated with pitakas. The latter may have been a box-like container that was attached to the pole. In Bengal, as argued by Agrawala (1970, 51), it is still the custom to hang such small box-like containers, or *Karandaka*, on such a Flag-staff. The Indra festival is described in some of the *Puranic* texts, such as the *Skanda*, the *Vishnudharmottara*, the *Kalika*, the *Devi*, and the *Agni Puranas* (Raghavan 1979, 129). The fall of a banner or *Dhwaja* of any kind was considered inauspicious during ancient times. The fall of the Indra Dhwaja even in a dream, according to the *Agni Purana*, is considered inauspicious, and it is auspicious to see oneself embracing or hoisting the Indra Dhwaja (Dange 1986, 76). The *Atharva-Parisistas* say that vultures or dark-coloured birds crossing the Flag-staff or its supporting ropes are signs of future calamity in the kingdom (Raghavan 1979, 120). The *Skanda Purana* mentions that when the demon Mahisha marched against the goddess Chandika, an owl sat on his chariot-banner and began hooting (Dange 1986, 76). Indra Dhwaja is primarily celebrated for victory. In Bengal, it was once customary for the king to recreate a war on the day of Indra Pooja. A *torana* was built on the ground of the festival, through which the king and his followers approached with music instruments, weapons, etc., and when they came near the *torana*, these were received by the officials and sent to the palace. As said by Basu (1978, 114), these indicate the areas where Indra worship is prevalent were conquered by the outsiders who were the followers of Vedic religion. It may be said that the tribal traditions of tree worship were adopted by the Aryans after conquering the tribal lands, and these were transformed into the Indra Dhwaja festival, the most elaborate rituals of which are described in the ancient texts.

Hudumdeo: A Vedic God?

The worship of Hudumdeo in Bengal is primarily a fertility cult. This cult was popular among the people of Jalpaiguri and Dinajpur. The Kochs and Rajbanshis consider this deity as a male god, but in some places in Dinajpur, this godling, as informed by E.A. Gait (1902, 191), seems to be androgynous. In a few places in Bangladesh, this tradition is followed, though in a different form. There were two frogs, one male and one female, who were married in a

A Study on the Cults of Indra and Hudumdeo in Bengal: Do These Have Vedic Roots?

ritualistic way. The word "Hudum" means "naked," and the worship of Hudumdeo is performed only by the women of the village (Biswas 1998, 61). This god is identified with Indra (Gait 1902, 191; Grierson 1877, 188). But at least two studies (Biswas 1998, 61; Kayal 1969, 19) indicate that it may have been the Vedic god Varuna. Whenever there is a protracted drought, as Charu Chandra Sanyal (1965, 144) said, the women of the village, with a sharp knife in hand as protection against the bhuts, go in the dark night into a distant paddy field. There, they make a statue of Hudumdeo and strip off their clothes. They dance and sing, abusing the god. Two women kneel on the ground like cows and draw a plough to scratch a few feet of the land. In the furrows, they sow some seeds, and after that, they put on their clothes and return to their home. No men are allowed to witness this ritual. It is said that rain invariably falls shortly after this worship. This ritual is generally performed in the month of *Baisakh* or in the summer months when there are chances of drought. Usually it was performed at night due to its unusual nature. In the hilly areas of Jalpaiguri Division, as informed by Akshay Kumar Kayal (1969, 19), on the new moon night, daughters and daughter-in-laws of different quarters assemble in a field and put off their clothes completely. They make the statue of Hudumdeo and do the rituals, as described earlier. After that, these women rounded the village, visiting houses. Men leave the house before they approach. This whole ritual of Hudumdeo is forbidden for men. Men should not watch these; otherwise, it was believed that they may get killed (Sanyal 1965, 144).

In Rangpur, Bangladesh, the worship of Hudumdeo is slightly different. In the months of *Chaitra* and *Baisakha*, when there was a drought, the women of the village formed a group and visited every house in the village to collect rice and seeds. Among the women, one is considered king, one is queen, and another woman is entrusted with the work of holding an umbrella on their heads. This ritual is called *Magon Jatra* (Ahmad 1965, 237–38). During their visit, they sing vulgar songs and perform sexually explicit dances. Men have no option but to leave the house before their visit. It was believed that Hudumdeo feared nudity, and after seeing these indecent rituals, the god brought rain. Ranjit Kumar Biswas (1998, 61) informs us that in Rangpur and adjoining districts in Bangladesh, as part of the Hudumdeo worship, the people dig a hole in the courtyard, fill it with water, and put two frogs in it. After the *Magon Jatra*, the collected grains were cooked, and these two frogs were married. Here also the obscene songs and dances are performed.

A Study on the Cults of Indra and Hudumdeo in Bengal: Do These Have Vedic Roots?

The worship of Hudumdeo was mostly done by the Rajbanshi women in the northern districts of West Bengal. The Rajbanshis, as argued by Bipul Mandal (2022), were converted to Hinduism; therefore, many of their cultural traditions have similarities with Hindu customs and mythology. But it is hard to tell if Hudumdeo is a Rajbanshi version of the Vedic god Indra or Varuna. Ranjit Kumar Biswas (1998, 61) argued that Hudumdeo is the folk version of Varuna. He opined that it was believed that the drought would end if Varuna and the earth goddess got intimate. That is why women, being a symbol of the earth, pretend to be intimate with Varuna's manifestation, Hudumdeo. A woman also symbolizes fertility. Hence, according to Biswas, people associated women with Varuna. But, as mentioned earlier, a number of studies and accounts associate Hudumdeo with Indra. As shown by Saswati Sengupta (2021, 37), the plough is forbidden to the female touch in a stringent form of Brahmanical patriarchy. So the rituals involving the tilling of a field by women indicate that it must have a non-Aryan origin. Later, when Vedic religion penetrated the tribal world, this cult may have been remodelled to suit the new culture.

Conclusion

The worship of Indra and Hudumdeo in Bengal is not a common practice nowadays. The former is rarely performed, while the latter is now almost discarded. The ancient Indra Dhwaja festival, which has been repeatedly mentioned in the scriptures, has a different outlook in Bengal. The foregoing discussion clearly indicated that the Idu Pooja of Bengal had its origins in the Indra worship of the Vedas. It has also been stated that the Vedic Aryans must have adopted it from the non-Aryans when they penetrated into the latter's land. The use of sal trees and the involvement of tribals in this festival are testimony to the fact that it was a festival of the tribal world. The worship of Hudumdeo is similarly a non-Aryan practice. The worship of this god can be performed only by women. And in the Vedic religion, women are not supposed to do rituals. Therefore, the present study concludes with the statement that while the Indra worship in Bengal has some elements of Vedic origin, the worship of

A Study on the Cults of Indra and Hudumdeo in Bengal: Do These Have Vedic Roots?

Hudumdeo is completely a non-Vedic, non-Aryan practice. However, more research is needed to get into the insights of these two traditions.

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A Study on the Cults of Indra and Hudumdeo in Bengal: Do These Have Vedic Roots?

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