

Sacredness of the Teesta: Origin and Significance

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Abstract: *This research paper delves into the sacredness of the Teesta River with a special emphasis on the origin of its worship and what this means to the people of North Bengal. Ancient Hindu scriptures refer to the Teesta as the Trisrota and associate the origin of the river with the goddess Parvati. Nonetheless, the river's spiritual significance extends beyond these traditional scriptures. Different tribes and communities such as the Rajbanshis, Mechs, Totos, Dhimals, and Nepalese people see the Teesta as a mother figure and hence personify it as Teesta Maai or Teesta Budi. The article helps readers understand that the custom of river worship along with the Mecheni Khela festival in particular might have been derived from the combination of tribal traditions and local folk narratives. The paper illustrates that people devote themselves to the river in two primary ways: firstly, showing thanks for the water that makes their agricultural fields productive, and secondly, expressing their anxiety for the destructive floods which have been their fate over and over again. This paper, through the lens of historical facts and local traditions, presents the Teesta as more than just a river. In fact, it is a mighty goddess who, according to the beliefs of the people is capable of protecting the harvest, the health, and the lives of the people.*

Keywords: North Bengal, Mecheni Khela, Teesta River, Trisrota, Teesta Budi, Rajbanshi etc.

Date of Submission:28.02.2026

Date of Acceptance: 03.03.2026

Introduction

The worship of rivers is very common in India. Most of the rivers in India have some spiritual significance. The *Rig Veda* (6.61) explicitly mentions a river goddess named Saraswati, representing the river of the same name, which has now become extinct.¹ The text also contains the celebrated *Nadi Stuti* (10.75) in praise of rivers such as Ganga, Yamuna, Sindhu, etc.² In later texts also rivers are continuously revered. In *Mahabharata*, for example, a river named *Trisrota* is mentioned in connection with the worship of the god Varuna.³ This river is identified with the Teesta River.⁴ The name *Trisrota* means “the river with three streams”, and the Teesta River is also possessed of three streams, namely, Punarbhava, Atrai,

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and Karatoya.⁵ However, the Karatoya is now an insignificant stream. The spiritual significance of the Teesta is well established in Hindu traditions. The *Trisrota* is mentioned in the *Kubjikamata-tantra* as a seat of the Goddess Trisrota.⁶ It actually refers to one of 51 *Shakti Peethas* of the Shakti traditions, which is situated in the Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal.⁷ This Shakti Peeth is situated near the Teesta River and the goddess is known as Bhramari, not Trisrota.⁸ Perhaps the *Kubjikamata-tantra* used the name of the river to denote the place and the deity. Another religious text the *Kalika Purana* describe a story of fighting between the goddess Parvati and an Asura (demon). The text mention that in the middle of the fight the Asura became thirsty and he prayed to Shiva to quench his thirst. Shiva then caused the river Trisrota to flow from the breasts of Parvati in three streams.⁹ Therefore, it is clear that the Teesta River is linked to the Hindu religious beliefs and practices.

Apart from the Hindus, the Teesta is considered sacred by other tribal and ethnic groups living in the northern districts of West Bengal. The Dhimals consider the Teesta as the Mother of All Gods, or *Timai vel Timang*.¹⁰ *Pekoi-Sowa* is worshipped by the Totos as the presiding deity of the Teesta River.¹¹ Similarly, the Nepali-speaking people living in the northern districts of West Bengal consider the Teesta as their mother and call her *Teesta Maai*.¹² The Rajbanshis worship the Teesta as *Teesta Budi* or *Budi Thakurani*, an old woman. Hence, it is clear that the Teesta River is sacred to a number of ethnic and religious communities living in West Bengal. Much research has already been done on the cult of the Teesta. But these works did not specifically investigate the origin and significance of the tradition of the Teesta worship in historical perspective. In this paper an attempt has been made to fill that gap and trace the origin as well as the significance of the Teesta worship.

The Teesta in Sacred Traditions: Origin

The Teesta River, as mentioned earlier, was known as *Trisrota*. The original Sanskrit name may have been corrupted to *Trishna*, meaning “thirst”.¹³ This makes sense, as according to the *Kalika Purana*, the origin of the Trisrota was the thirst of an Asura. Later the name was further corrupted to *Sthista*, *Tishta*, and finally to *Teesta*.¹⁴ The sacredness of the Teesta can be traced to the idea that all rivers descended from heaven. Of all the rivers, the Ganga is considered the most sacred. But when the water of the Ganga is not available, water from other rivers is considered for religious purposes. The Teesta is the most important river of North Bengal. It enjoys the similar respect from the people as the Ganga. The Rajbanshis

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worship this river as an old woman named *Teesta Budi*, or *Budi Thakurani*. This river goddess is worshipped in the *Mecheni Khela* festival, which is generally performed in the *Baisakh* month of the Bengali calendar. In this festival, women worship the river goddess with flowers and vermillion. They sing and dance with umbrellas as parts of the worship. One interesting thing about this festival is that only women are allowed to participate in the worship of Teesta Budi.

Charu Chandra Sanyal opined that the *Mecheni Khela* may have originated in the Mech society.¹⁵ The Mech tribal communities live in the northern districts of West Bengal and in Assam. According to Sanyal, the *Mecheni Khela* originated first in the Mech society, and later it was adopted by the Rajbanshis. There was a Mech settlement in Uttar Phulbari, Malabazar, and it is said that Shiva came there to live with a Mech woman. Parvati and Ganga disguised themselves as Mech women and lived with Shiva there. The folktale suggests that *Teesta Budi* is an emblem of Parvati and Ganga. However, this theory has attracted strong criticism from Girija Shankar Roy.¹⁶ He argued that if the *Mecheni Khela* originated first in the Mech society, then a similar type of festival or ritual must have existed in their society. But no trace of a similar festival can be found in the Mech society. This clearly indicates that the festival *Mecheni Khela* did not originate in the Mech society. The folktale mentioned by Sanyal, or its similar version, can not be found in any Hindu scriptures. Therefore, according to Roy, the worship of Teesta Budi and the *Mecheni Khela* did not originate in the Mech society and the story did not have roots in Hindu scriptures.¹⁷ Instead, Roy suggested that the *Mecheni Khela* originated from a river named Mechi that flowed from Saldanga village and joined the Teesta in Dharmapur, both located in Maynaguri. According to Roy, the *Mecheni Khela* was perhaps performed by the people who lived on the banks of the Mechi River.¹⁸ Later it may have been adopted by the Rajbanshis. However, he also pointed out that the *Mecheni Khela* is performed in some parts of the Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar districts only. Though a river named Mechi flows in the Darjeeling district, no *Mecheni Khela* is performed there. However, the worship of Teesta Budi is performed in various parts of North Bengal and Bangladesh. This may indicate that the *Mecheni Khela* has some connection with the Mech tribe or the Mechi River, or with both. By studying the arguments of Sanyal and Roy, it seems that the *Mecheni Khela* may have originated from the Mech tribal people who once lived on the banks of the Mechi River in Saldanga, and later it was adopted by the Rajbanshis. The name of the river suggests that it had some connection with the Mech tribe, who probably lived on the banks of the river. Therefore, it is quite

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possible that the Mecheni Khela and the Mechi River both got their names from the Mech tribe.

The origin of the worship of Teesta Budi, or Budi Thakurani, is complex. Generally, most of the rivers in India are considered female. The maternal aspect is primarily due to the immense role of rivers in agriculture and irrigation. The Ganga is considered sacred due to its important role in nourishing the lands of northern India. Similarly, the Teesta is also considered sacred due to its role in making lands fertile for agriculture. However, floods in the Teesta are disastrous. There are some devastating floods on the Teesta recorded in history. The most notable is the flood of 1786, which ultimately forced the Teesta to desert its course and revert back to its ancient bed, leading to the death of a number of people and animals and the destruction of crops and fields.¹⁹ Therefore, not just the reverence but also fear contributed to the development of various mythological traditions centering on the Teesta.²⁰ In this connection a folktale can be mentioned. There was a clash between a forest deity of Ambari-Falakata and the goddess of the Teesta River.²¹ The forest deity, known as Maharaja, was offered a boy as sacrifice. The mother of the boy, an old woman, started crying, and hearing her cry, the goddess of the river Teesta became angry and tried to destroy everything with the river's water. To pacify the anger of the Teesta, people started worshipping the river goddess, and perhaps because the goddess was sympathetic towards an old woman, the goddess was perceived as an old woman. It is possible that in this way the goddess of the Teesta River became Teesta Budi or Budi Thakurani. However, in other communities the Teesta is considered a mother. It has already been pointed out that the Nepali-speaking people, the Totos, and the Dhimals worship the river as a mother goddess. Hence, fear as well as reverence were both responsible for the development of a tradition of the Teesta worship.

Significance of the Teesta Worship

The Teesta worship is mostly performed in the northern districts of West Bengal, specifically in those areas where the Teesta flows. The worship of the river in the form of Teesta Budi may indicate that it is a fertility cult.²² Agriculture in the northern districts primarily depends on the water provided by the Teesta River. Also, agricultural production can be damaged by the floods on the Teesta. Therefore, protection of crops and lives is the primary intention of the worship of Teesta Budi. Girija Shankar Roy has also pointed out that Teesta Budi is

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worshipped to prevent floods.²³ Similarly, Charu Chandra Sanyal opined that the Teesta is sacred to the agricultural communities because it provides water for irrigation through its three streams.²⁴ Ranjit Kumar Biswas also suggested that Teesta Budi is a goddess of rain and harvest, and people worship her to end drought.²⁵ However, Sanyal also pointed out that Teesta Budi is also worshipped to ward off evil spirits that cause various diseases.²⁶ Sarat Chandra Mitra wrote that during his stay in Jalpaiguri, he witnessed the worship of Teesta Maai (Mother Teesta) by his Nepali-speaking servant.²⁷ The servant was ill and vowed to worship Teesta Maai if recovered from illness. As the worship of Teesta Budi is dominated by women, it may have been a product of matriarchal culture. Thus, the significance of the Teesta River and its worship is varied. Because of its immense role in agriculture, the Teesta became a goddess. People worship her not only to show gratitude but also to pacify her to prevent floods.

Conclusion

In brief, for the people of North Bengal, the Teesta is far more than just a river; it is a living goddess who has been a companion to their lives since time immemorial. From early times when the river was called *Trisrota* in the *Puranas*, to contemporary times when *Teesta Budi* is worshipped, the river has been very dear to various communities' hearts. The Rajbanshis, the Mechs, the Totos, and the Nepalese people are a few of the communities that personify the Teesta as a mother figure who gives them water for their crops and ensures the safety of their families.

This paper has illustrated that the adoration of Teesta originated from both admiration and apprehension. People worship her to express gratitude for the bountiful harvests and the fertile soil, as well as to seek protection against the catastrophic floods that the river sometimes causes. The ritual of Mecheni Khela and the tales of a *Budi Thakurani* are examples of how tribal traditions have been integrated with Hindu faiths over the years. Even in this modern age, the Teesta stands as a metaphor for life and faith, thus establishing that the people of North Bengal and their river share an unbreakable relationship.

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