

A Comparative Study of Matua and Mainstream Bengali Kaviyals: A Comparative Discussion

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Abstract

Kavigaan is a form of Bengali folk performance that combines music, poetry, and debate; it expresses a community's views and values. The Matua Kaviyal style has been particularly successful in its advocacy of social equality and spiritual devotion, inspired by the two religious leaders, Harichand and Guruchand Thakur. In contrast to many other Kaviyal forms of Bengali folk performance, which are typically devoted to entertainment through mythological stories and philosophical discussions, Matua Kavigaan emphasizes social justice and collective solidarity. Through this study, we will explore the function of Kavigaan as an aspect of culture and the necessity of preserving these two traditions of Bengal's heritage.

Keywords: Kavigaan; Matua community; Kaviyals; Bengali folk culture

Plain language summary:

Kavigaan is a traditional Bengali folk performance style in which poet-singers present musical debates. This study compares the Kaviyals of the Matua community to those of other Bengali Kaviyals. Traditionally, Matua Kaviyals are composed of songs based on the teachings of Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur and contain messages of equality, devotion, and social justice. In contrast, most Bengali Kaviyals have traditionally dealt with mythological stories, religious debates, and entertainment. Both types of Kaviyals use similar methods of presentation, including music, improvisation, and audience participation. This study will provide insight into how Kavigaan has been influenced by the culture and values of different communities and will highlight the importance of protecting the Kavigaan tradition as part of Bengal's cultural heritage.



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Introduction:

Kavigaan is a very important and long-standing type of Bengali folk performance. Through a combination of poetry, music, and debate, Kavigaan represents a dynamic and living oral performance tradition. As a popular cultural activity, Kavigaan originated in rural Bengal in the 18th and 19th centuries at rural fairs, religious ceremonies, and village festivals. Within the Kavigaan performance tradition, poet-singer participants called Kaviyals compete with each other in lyrical debates, demonstrating their creative abilities, wit, and knowledge while entertaining the audience. Over time, Kavigaan has become a highly effective means of expressing and communicating various social ideas, religious beliefs, and cultural values to local communities in which it is practiced. As a form of performance art, Kavigaan has been shaped and influenced by various social and religious groups that have participated in it. One group that has made a significant contribution to the development of Kavigaan is the Matua community, a religious and social movement that was founded in the 19th century by Harichand Thakur among the marginalized Namasudra community of Bengal. The Matua movement promoted spirituality, equality, education, and the rejection of caste-based discrimination. The Matua movement used devotional songs, oral performances, and folk traditions, such as Kavigaan, to communicate its values and ideals. Matua Kaviyals have adapted the traditional format of Kavigaan to communicate the teachings and philosophy of the Matua faith. Most of their performances include themes about equality, the dignity of humanity, and social reform. Most Bengali Kaviyals, however, have traditionally dealt with mythological narratives, philosophical debates, and literary expressions from a classical Hindu perspective.

Comparative studies of these two forms of kavigaan can illustrate the rich diversity of Bengali folk culture. By comparing the themes of the two traditions, the performance settings of the two traditions and the social purposes of the two traditions, this study can examine how different communities reshape and reinterpret the Kavigaan tradition to represent their own unique cultural identities and experiences throughout history.

Literature Review:

Scholars recognize Kavigaan as a significant part of Bengali folk culture (Sen, 2010). Sen indicates that Kavigaan was formed by poets as a form of poetic competition among rural Bengalis and is a combination of improvisational poetry, music, and debate. Additionally, according to Chakraborty (2014), Kavigaan performance represents the traditions of oral storytelling and community involvement. The literature on the Matua movement illustrates how folk cultural forms disseminate social and religious ideologies for this movement. Bandyopadhyay (2012) indicates that Matua devotional songs and performances were ways for marginalized communities to express their



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hopes and dreams; however, Sarkar (2017) suggests that the cultural expression of this type helped to create social consciousness and group identity. Additionally, scholars have emphasized the role of Kaviyals as cultural teachers, who teach through performance various moral and social values (Dutta, 2015). Furthermore, Bhattacharya (2019) has indicated that such traditions as Kavigaan are means to conserve oral knowledge and community histories. Although there is a body of literature concerning Kavigaan and the Matua movement, very little comparative analysis exists concerning Matua community Kaviyals and other Bengali Kaviyals. The purpose of this study is to fill this gap.

Research Gap:

Despite many studies on the history of Kavigaan and the social philosophy of the Matua Movement, little research has directly compared the performances of Matua community Kaviyals to those of other Bengali Kaviyals. Most previous studies have focused on either the literary aspects of Kavigaan or the religious and social aspects of the Matua Movement separately. Thus, the distinct contributions of Matua Kaviyals within the larger Kavigaan tradition remain under-explored. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by providing a comparative exploration that highlights thematic differences, cultural context, and social function among the two types of performers.

Research Questions:

1. What are the primary thematic differences between the Matua community Kaviyals and other Bengali Kaviyals?
2. In what ways do the performance settings and social functions of these two traditions differ?
3. In what ways do both traditions contribute to the preservation of Bengali folk culture?

Objectives of the Study:

1. To investigate characteristics of Kavigaan in the Matua Community.
2. To compare the themes and performance styles of Matua Kaviyals and other Bengali Kaviyals.
3. To assess the cultural and social significance of these traditions in Bengali Folk Heritage.

Research Method:

Research Methodology: Qualitative research methodology was used in this study to investigate and describe the attributes of the Matua community 's Kaviyal as well as other Bengali Kaviyals.



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Sources of secondary data: Books, academic journals, and scholarly literature concerning Kavigaan and the Matua movement were used as the secondary data for this research.

Analysis Using Thematic Content: Thematic content analysis of the data was conducted to discover patterns, similarities, and differences between the Kaviyals within the Matua community and those that are Bengali, but not part of the Matua community.

Discussion and Analysis:

The Matua Kaviyals of the Matua community represent a unique branch of Bengali Kaviyals due to the nature of their performances as well as the content they include in those performances. A comparison of the Matua Kaviyals with the rest of the Bengali Kaviyals shows that there is a commonality among all Kaviyals with regard to the way they incorporate art forms such as poetry, music, and debate; however, the content and overall tone of their performances differ significantly. The most noticeable difference is the content presented in the performances. Many of the Matua Kaviyals have included devotional songs and philosophical teachings about the importance of Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur's teachings regarding spiritual equality, social justice, and the self-worth of the poor. This content has been expressed through the use of poetic dialogue and lyrical expressions; therefore, the Matua Kaviyals are able to convey the values of human equality and the need for social reform through their performances. On the other hand, many of the traditional Bengali Kaviyals have placed more emphasis on presenting mythological stories and debating the philosophies found in religious texts such as the Ramayana, Mahabharata and Puranas. Traditionally, performances by Kaviyals have involved elaborate poetic dialogues in which Kaviyals competed against one another to showcase their intellect, creative writing abilities, and poetic skills. Although many Kaviyals discussed moral teachings, entertainment, and the ability to outdo one another in terms of poetic prowess was equally important. An additional area where the two traditions differ is the purpose of the performances. For the Matua community, Kavigaan is a key component of religious celebrations and festivals and serves as a means of expressing devotion and reinforcing the sense of unity and shared values of the Matua community. Furthermore, Kavigaan serves as a vehicle for community-based education and support. In contrast, the majority of the Kavigaan performed by the larger Bengali community has traditionally been a competitive public performance. During Kaviyals' poetic competitions (also referred to as "poetic duels"), Kaviyals would respond immediately to the arguments presented by their opponents while performing for the entertainment of their audiences. These events would typically be held at fairs and other social gatherings and would attract people from various social strata. The language and style of presentation also illustrate the differences in the two traditions. Typically, Matua Kaviyals utilize simple and direct language to ensure that their message reaches a wide



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audience and is understood clearly. Therefore, Matua Kaviyals place a greater emphasis on the emotional aspect of their presentations versus the complexity of their poetic structure. Conversely, many traditional Kaviyals would use highly technical linguistic devices, references to classical literature, and elaborate poetic structures to display their literary talent. Despite these differences, there are some similarities between the two traditions. Improvisational elements, musical accompaniment, poetic dialogue, and audience participation are essential components of both types of kaviyals. Both traditions contribute to the preservation of oral traditions and cultural heritage. Generally, this comparison illustrates that kavigaan is a highly adaptable form of culture that allows various communities to express their own values, beliefs, and social circumstances. The use of kavigaan by the Matua community exemplifies how folklore can be utilized as a powerful tool for raising social awareness and empowering communities. Examining five well-known Kaviyals provides insight into the varied paths Kavigaan traveled throughout Bengal. On the Matua side of the Kaviyals, Bijoy Krishna Sarkar, Tarak Chandra Sarkar, and Keshab Chandra Sarkar based their performances on the egalitarian teachings of Harichand Thakur. As a result, their theme of social justice and spiritual equality was expressed through the use of plain and direct language to effectively communicate their message to marginalized communities. In contrast, the traditional Kaviyals of the mainstream Bengali community, such as Ram Basu and Anthony Firingee, often emphasized mythological or philosophical debates in their performances. Ram Basu demonstrated complex, competitive poetic duels derived from scripture, whereas Anthony Firingee added intercultural elements to his performances. While Ram Basu and Anthony Firingee employed technically advanced language in their performances, Ram Basu primarily concentrated on demonstrating intellectual competition and poetic rivalries, whereas Anthony Firingee concentrated on the entertainment value of his performances. Ultimately, while the Matua Kaviyals attempted to elevate their social status through simple devotion, the traditional Kaviyals sought to entertain through intellectual competitions and poetic rivalries.

Findings:

The study showed that the Matua community's Kaviyals and other Bengali Kaviyals shared an artistic framework based on the Kavigaan tradition of performance poetry, song, spontaneous composition, and interactive dialogue with the audience; however, they had distinct differences in subject matter and social function. Matua Kaviyals focus their themes on the spiritual principles of Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur and utilize Kavigaan to advocate for social reform, equality, and devotion, whereas Bengali Kaviyals typically explore mythological narratives, philosophical debates, and performative works for entertainment purposes.



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The study found that Matua Kaviyals tend to use straightforward language to convey their message so that audiences can easily understand them. Comparing both traditions, the results highlighted Kavigaan's ability to serve as a flexible cultural form that represents the values of different religious and social communities in Bengal.

Academic Implications:

The conclusions drawn from this study have potential applications in educational practice and cultural studies. Including folk traditions, such as kavigaan, in academic curricula could assist students in appreciating the cultural diversity and social histories of Bengal. In addition, studying the kaviyals of the Matua community could offer insights into how marginalized communities utilize creative cultural expressions to express themselves and raise social awareness of issues affecting them. Educational institutions should facilitate research into folklore and support efforts to document oral cultural traditions. These actions will enable the preservation of cultural knowledge that could otherwise be lost due to modernization and changes in the ways people engage in entertainment. Comparative studies, such as this one, have the potential to increase interdisciplinary education by linking English, history, sociology, and cultural studies. Educators can encourage students to appreciate cultural diversity and think critically about the cultural value of traditional art forms by demonstrating how various communities interpret and modify folklore traditions.

Limitations/Delimitations

Owing to the use of secondary materials as opposed to firsthand observations or interviews with the Kaviyals themselves, this study has limitations regarding the depth of information available about performance practices. This study is also limited in terms of its focus on thematic and cultural comparisons between the two traditions of Kaviyals and does not include the musical characteristics of each tradition. Additionally, this study is largely concerned with the Matua community and the general group of Bengali Kaviyals, while neglecting regional variations within these traditions. Despite these limitations, this study provided a focused comparative perspective that contributed to the understanding of the cultural significance of Kavigaan in different community contexts.

Significance:

This study contributes to the understanding of Bengali folklore by illustrating the unique role of the Matua community's Kaviyals within the larger Kavigaan tradition. It demonstrated through comparisons of different types of Kaviyals how folklore performance traditions can reflect the



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differing social experiences and cultural identities of various communities. The study also stressed the importance of preserving oral traditions as vital cultural assets. Further, it encouraged continued research into marginalized cultural expressions and their contributions to local heritages. The comparative method used in this study expanded the body of scholarly knowledge concerning the connection between folklore performance, community identity, and social change.

Suggestions for future study

1. Future studies should document the performance practices of current active Kaviyals.
2. Researchers should investigate regional differences in Kavigaan traditions.
3. Educational institutions should support and encourage the research and documentation of folk performances.
4. Cultural institutions should provide support and encouragement for the preservation and promotion of Kavigaan traditions.

Conclusion:

Kavigaan is an integral part of Bengali folk culture which brings together poetry, music, and argumentation into a singular performative tradition. This comparative study examines how the Matua community has modified the Kavigaan format to articulate its own spiritual philosophy, social ideals, and cultural identity. Although Matua Kaviyals tend to deal with issues of social equality, devotion, and social reform, many Kaviyals (Bengali) discuss mythology, philosophical issues, and literary performance. Regardless of the theme discussed, the two traditions share comparable forms of artistic expression and contribute significantly to the preservation of the country's oral cultural heritage. The study shows that Kavigaan can serve as a vehicle for both entertainment and as a means for cultural communication and social critique. Therefore, preserving these traditions is vital to protecting the rich diversity of Bengali folk culture and ensuring that future generations will continue to understand and benefit from these valuable cultural expressions.

Funds statement:

This research received no specific grant from any public, private, or non-profit sector. This study was conducted independently using available academic resources (books, journals, and articles) concerning Bengali folklore and the Matua community. The lack of outside funding allowed the researcher to maintain independence from financial interests and institutional bias during the data analysis and interpretation processes.



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Conflict of interest:

The author states that there are no potential conflicts of interest associated with this research. This research was conducted independently, without any financial, institutional, or personal connections that may have influenced either the research process or the results of this study. The author ensured that all interpretations and conclusions were based on academic sources and unbiased analysis. The study's similarity to previous research is strictly academic and is intended to add to ongoing scholarly discussions of Bengali folklore and the Matua community.

Data access statement:

All data used in this study were secondary and drawn from publicly available sources, such as books, academic journal articles, and previously published research regarding Kavigaan and the Matua movement. No primary data were collected for this study. All materials analyzed for this study are accessible through academic libraries, digital repositories, and published literature concerning Bengali folklore. Researchers wishing to further examine this topic should refer to the bibliography at the conclusion of this article.

Ethics:

This research followed the normal standards of ethics and academia for qualitative research using secondary data. As this study did not involve any human subjects, interviews, or field experiments, formal ethical approval was not necessary. All sources of information were appropriately referenced and cited in accordance with APA style, seventh edition. Every effort was made to represent and respect cultural traditions and community practices fairly and accurately. The purpose of the research was to enhance the understanding and appreciation of Bengali folk heritage, not to misrepresent it. The researcher acted responsibly at each step of the research, writing, and dissemination processes.

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