

Sangam and Kumbh Mela in Bengal: The Sacred Legacy of 'Dakshin Prayag' Tribeni

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To understand the spiritual importance of Tribeni in the Hooghly district of West Bengal, one need not depend on archaeology, colonial records, or foreign testimonies. The meaning of Tribeni itself is self-evident: the confluence of three braided rivers. Just as Prayagraj in Uttar Pradesh is revered as Triveni Sangam, so too is Tribeni in Bengal. This is a geographical reality that anyone can verify independently.

Do Hindus take ritual baths at Tribeni? Yes just as they do at Prayag, Rishikesh, Nashik, or Ujjain and they have done so for centuries. Wherever three sacred rivers meet, especially when associated with the Ganga, Hindu tradition accords the site exceptional sanctity. Tribeni Hooghly thus stands firmly within this ancient pilgrimage geography.

Tribeni as the "Southern Prayag"

The idea of Tribeni in Bengal as a southern counterpart of Prayagraj is not modern. It is recorded clearly in classical Bengali scholarship. The revered poet Raghunandan, in his *Prāyaścitta Tattva*, writes:

"In the Southern Prayag, its open braids adorn seven villages; the southern land acknowledges it as Triveni."

(দক্ষিণ প্রয়াগ উন্মুক্ত বেণী সপ্ত গ্রামোখ্যা/ দক্ষিণ দেশে ত্রিবেণী খ্যাতঃ।)

This identification of Tribeni as Daksina Prayāga-the Pravag of the south forms the ritual and theological foundation for the snanas and meläs historically held here, especially during auspicious calendrical transitions such as Kumbh Sankranti.

Saptagram, Saptarishi, and the Sacred Landscape

The sacred geography of Tribeni is deeply intertwined with Saptagram, one of medieval Bengal's most important religious and commercial centers. The Vaishnava scholar Brindaban Das, in his Chaitanya Bhagabat, offers a vivid account of this sanctity. He describes Saptagram Triveni Ghat as the place where the Saptarishi once performed penance, where the three goddesses-Jahnavi (Ganga), Jamuna, and Saraswati-met, and where bathing erased the sins of humanity. He records that Nityananda Mahaprabhu himself bathed joyfully at this ghat, affirming its living devotional significance.

Similarly, the celebrated poet Madhabacharya, author of Chandimangal, identifies himself as a resident of Tribeni. In his self-description, he situates his lineage on the banks of the threefold

Ganga at Saptagram, associating the region with Parashar Muni, *yajña*, and ascetic excellence-further anchoring Tribeni in India's sacred literary memory."

Legends of the Saptarishi and Saraswati

Historian Munindra Deb Roy, in *Saga of Hooghly*, preserves local traditions linking Saptagram to ancient sages and princes. He recounts how seven sages or in some versions, seven princely, devotees of Vishnu settled along the banks of the Saraswati River, giving rise to the name Saptagram. The Saraswati's confluence here was believed so potent that even legendary births were shaped by its sanctity."

Roy also records that when Devi Suradhani (the Ganga) journeyed south from Haridwar, the Saptarishi Marichi, Atri, Angira, Pulastya, Pulaha, Kratu, and Vashishtha accompanied her and worshipped her at Saptagram. To this day, Rishi Ghat (Saptarishi Ghat) remains a living marker of these traditions, with the names of sages engraved at the nearby ashram established by Abhayananda Giri.

Understanding Kumbh and Kumbh Snan

What, then, is Kumbh?

Leaving aside Puranic symbolism, Kumbh is fundamentally rooted in Hindu astronomy and calendrical science. Large congregational baths (*snānas*) at Prayag and other sacred confluences are ancient, though the formal term "Kumbh Mela" appears relatively late in historical records-becoming common only by the mid-19th century. This absence of terminology does not imply absence of practice. Indian history has endured long periods of upheaval, during which documentation was often lost or interrupted, including in regions such as Tribeni and Saptagram.

In astrological terms:

- Mahakumbh and Ardha Kumbh depend on complex planetary alignments.
- Anu (Mini) Kumbh is simpler and occurs when the Sun transits from Makara (Capricorn) to Kumbha (Aquarius) an event known as Kumbh Sankranti.

The ritual bath taken on this day is variously called Sankranti Snän, Mäghī Snän, or Kumbh Snän. At Prayagraj, such an Anu Kumbh is observed annually in the month of Magha. The same calendrical logic historically governed ritual baths and meläs at Tribeni, grounded in its identity as Daksina Prayāga.

Tribeni Hooghly is not a modern invention, nor a borrowed tradition. It is a living sacred landscape, sustained by geography, scripture, poetry, ritual practice, and collective memory. Its Sangam, its *snānas*, and its melas including those aligned with Kumbh Sankranti-stand firmly

within the continuum of Hindu civilizational tradition, just as authentic and enduring as those of Prayagraj, Nashik, or Ujjain.

A Brief Historical Overview of the Tribeni-Saptagram Region :

The historical importance of the Tribeni-Saptagram region must be understood against the backdrop of early medieval Bengal, a period marked by political fragmentation, regional autonomy, and repeated foreign military incursions that caused significant destruction of settlements, temples, and populations.

According to Minhaj-i-Siraj's *Tabaqat-i-Näsiri*, during the reign of Narasimha Deva 1 of the Eastern Ganga dynasty (r. 1238-1264 CE), the Turkic commander Tughril Tughan Khan attempted to extend Muslim control into southern Bengal. In 1244 CE, a major conflict occurred at Katas, within a fortified zone, where Tughril's forces suffered a decisive defeat and retreated toward Lakhnauti."

Archaeological and literary evidence indicates that during the Bhaumakara, Pala, Sena, and Eastern Ganga periods, numerous Hindu temples dedicated to Siva, Viṣṇu, Varaha, Candi, Sarasvati, and other deities existed across Tribeni, Saptagram, Pandua (Pradyumnanagar), Mahanad, Dwarbasini, Sudarshan, and Sangrampur."

The remains associated with the Śrī Śrikhalā Devi temple at Pandua, regarded in local tradition as a Mahāpīṭha, are often cited as material evidence of this pre-Islamic sacred landscape, particularly its stone architectural elements.

The historian Nihar Ranjan Ray notes that during the decline of the Sena dynasty, Bengal was effectively divided into three political zones: northern Bengal around Lakhnauti under Muslim rulers, southeastern Bengal under residual Sena authority, and southwestern Bengal including Saptagram and Tribeni under the Eastern Ganga rulers of Odisha."

Muslim political control over Saptagram appears only later, during the reign of Rukn al-Din Kaikaus (r. 1291-1301 CE), with the campaigns of Zafar Khan Gazi. An inscription dated 1298 CE records violent suppression and rewards typical of conquest inscriptions.

Between 1288 and 1313 CE, Saptagram and Tribeni came firmly under Muslim control. Multiple historians document systematic demolition of Hindu and Buddhist temples and monasteries, followed by construction of mosques and dargahs using spolia from earlier religious structures,

Rakhaldas Banerji and Pranab Roy note that architectural fragments at the Zafar Khan Gazi dargah pillars, sculptures, and early Bengali inscriptions clearly predate Islamic construction and include defaced Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist imagery,

Tribeni's Enduring Sacred Status

Despite political upheavals, Tribeni's religious significance endured. Anthropologist Alan Morinis writes:

"Besides Gangasagar, only Tribeni-located within Bansberia town in the Hooghly district has a strong claim to antiquity... It is regarded as the southern counterpart of Prayaga."

Morinis further notes that priests distinguish Prayaga as Yuktavení (closed braid) and Tribeni as Muktaveni (open braid), since the Sarasvati remains visible at Tribeni.



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