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

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. [1]

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. [2]

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)[3]

This identification of Tribeni as *Dakṣiṇa Prayāga*—the Prayag of the south—forms the ritual and theological foundation for the snānas and melās historically held here, especially during auspicious calendrical transitions such as Kumbh Saṅkrānti.

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 Bhāgabat*, 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. [4]

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. [5]

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. [6]

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 Purāṇic 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.[7]

In astrological terms:
• Mahākumbh 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 Saṅkrānti.

The ritual bath taken on this day is variously called Saṅkrānti Snān, Māghī Snān, or Kumbh Snān. At Prayagraj, such an Anu Kumbh is observed annually in the month of Māgha. The same calendrical logic historically governed ritual baths and melās at Tribeni, grounded in its identity as *Dakṣiṇa 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 melās—including those aligned with Kumbh Saṅkrānti—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 *Ṭabaqāt-i-Nāṣirī*, during the reign of Narasimha Deva I 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.[8]

Archaeological and literary evidence indicates that during the Bhaumakara, Pala, Sena, and Eastern Ganga periods, numerous Hindu temples dedicated to Śiva, Viṣṇu, Varāha, Caṇḍī, Sarasvatī, and other deities existed across Tribeni, Saptagram, Pandua (Pradyumnanagar), Mahanad, Dwarbasini, Sudarshan, and Sangrampur.[9]

The remains associated with the Śrī Śṛṅkhalā Devī 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.[10]

The historian Niharranjan 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.[11]

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.[12]

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.[13]

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. [14]

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."[15]

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

Kanchan Banerjee, while researching for the book 'The Crash of a Civilization,' discovered the lost history of Tribeni. He, his wife Haimanti, and a small team from Bengal organised the first Kumbh revival event in 2022. It was supported by many in the US, especially Sri Srikanta Mookerjee.

www.tribenikumbho.org

Footnotes

1. Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, vol. 1 (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1946), 56–59.
2. N. A. Nikam and Richard McKeon, *The Edicts of Asoka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), introduction.
3. Raghunandan Bhattacharya, *Prāyaścitta Tattva*, cited in Suresh Chandra Bandopadhyay, *Bāṅglār Tīrthasthān* (Kolkata: Sahitya Samsad, 1987), 112–13.
4. Brindaban Das, *Śrī Chaitanya Bhāgabat*, Madhya Khanda (Kolkata: Sahitya Akademi, 1963).
5. Madhabacharya, *Chandimangal*, ed. Asutosh Bhattacharya (Kolkata: Calcutta University Press, 1954).
6. Munindra Deb Roy, *Saga of Hooghly* (Kolkata: Firma KLM, 1991), 34–41.
7. Romila Thapar, *Time as a Metaphor of History* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 82–85.
8. Minhaj-i-Siraj Juzjani, *Ṭabaqāt-i-Nāṣirī*, trans. H. G. Raverty (Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint, 1970), 611–13.
9. R. C. Majumdar, *The History of Bengal*, vol. 1 (Dhaka: University of Dhaka, 1943), 243–50.
10. Dinesh Chandra Sircar, *Studies in the Geography of Ancient and Medieval India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1971), 203–06.
11. Niharranjan Ray, *Bangālīr Itihās: Ādi Parva* (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 1980), 467–72.

12. Kalika Ranjan Kanungo, *History of the Khilji Dynasty* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1951), 94–97.
13. Rakhaldas Banerji, *Eastern Indian Mediaeval Architecture* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1933), 52–61.
14. Pranab Roy, *Hooghly Jelar Itihas* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 1998), 142–49.
15. Alan Morinis, *Pilgrimage in the Hindu Tradition: A Case Study of West Bengal* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), 112–14.