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Bargaining with God: Explicating Gambhira as A Political Space of Marginal People

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Abstract

Folk forms serve as powerful tools which focus on the socio-political and religio-ontological trajectories of particular communities and forge their identities by expressing shared values and aesthetics for proper integration within the group. Gambhira, an ancient and popular folk form of Malda district is linked with folk rituals of worship. In past, Malda and adjacent areas were centres for the practice of Buddhism. Borendrabhumi, which was included under Pundrabardhan, mainly followed Buddhism, but later on, due to the idealistic strife, the Buddhists got separated into different groups and a distinct method of Shiva worship known as Gajan or Gambhira puja started to become popular. But the Buddhist concept of atonement through the confession of guilt remained the central ideal of Gambhira drama. Gambhira discharges the responsibility of depicting joys and distresses, of protesting against violence and injustice by speaking the truth like an ideal journalist aiming to protect the democratic rights of the people. Interestingly, this is not a traditional kind of worship where the god is simply offered devotional homage and prayer. Here, God especially Lord Shiva who actually represents the people in

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power, is rather challenged, insulted, attacked and ridiculed while performers put their battery of complaints against him. Lord Shiva is sometimes presented as 'nana' (maternal grandfather) who listens to their objections and gives solutions and sometimes functions as the representative of the corrupt and indifferent politician or the suppressive colonial power. Significantly, the themes range from the utmost domestic and local to the national and international issues; from domestic violence, natural calamity to human trafficking; from the revolutions of Singur and Nandigram to distressing situations during the Emergency. Their narratives represent the communities' fundamental values, beliefs, their thought process and varied experiences of life itself to provide a moral framework and indulge in wondrous engagements to look at reality anew. This paper intends to explore how Gambhira, in the form of political conversation between people from margins and those in power, transmutes the daily struggle of the former into a popular art form, becomes a shared socio-political space to air injustice and indignity done by the harsh repressive power structure and thus serves as a powerful weapon to secure their democratic rights.

Keywords: Folk form, Identity, Marginalisation, Rights, Space.

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Folk forms serve as powerful tools which focus on the socio-political and religio-ontological trajectories of particular communities and forge their identities by expressing shared values and aesthetics for proper integration within the group. These are products of rural creative minds drawing experiences from their life with the insight of fostering critical perspectives and enlarging aesthetic sensibilities. Gambhira, an ancient and popular folk form of Malda district, is fundamentally linked with folk rituals of worship, where performers comment on social and political matters through sarcasm and laughter. This is not a traditional kind of worship where god is simply offered devotional homage and prayer. Here, God especially Lord Shiva who actually represents the people in power, is rather challenged, insulted, attacked and ridiculed when performers put their battery of complaints against him (Chakraborty, 2018).

In the past, Malda and adjacent areas were centres for practice of Buddhism. Borendrabhumi which was included under Pundrabardhan mainly followed this religion. But due to the idealistic strife, the Buddhists got separated into different groups and a distinct method of Shiva worship known as Gajan or Gambhira puja became popular. But the Buddhist concept of atonement through the confession of guilt remains the central ideal of Gambhira drama. While mapping the diverse progression of Gambhira, Haridas Palit opines that Gambhira is not mere folk song or folk culture. Rather, this can be specifically called “ancholana”, meaning a special kind of folk art form consisting of the prominent characteristics of a particular community of a particular region. Across the vast basins of the great Ganges of the undivided Malda District, the influence of these folk forms was prominently seen and with its uniqueness of combined art and culture it has been continuing its flow. Presently, three types of “Anchlana” or provinciality of Gambhira can be traced in West Bengal. These are “Vawaiya” in the northern districts, “Jhumur” in the southern districts, and “Gambhira” in the districts which are mainly connected with the basins of the Ganges. And if we further map the progression of Gambhira of Malda District, it would be found that this is primarily categorised into three parts: English Bazar town centric Gambhira, Gambhira of Tal-Diara and Gambhira of Barind. The major distinction among these varied Gambhira songs is that the urban-centric songs were dominated by dance and the musical sound of “Dhak”, a large, double-headed wooden barrel drum from the Indian subcontinent; however, these are now leaning towards song elements. Gambhirasongs created in the Barind province had a primitive touch and are currently being added to with “tantric” ritualistic behavior. The centre of Gambhira songs which were created in Malda District till the first two decades of the twentieth century was worship-oriented activities and rituals and then it gradually grew to be centred on songs (Palit, 2013).

Though the meaning of the word “Gambhira” is not clear, and critics differ relating to the meaning and source of the word, the popular and much accepted meaning of the term is that it is a special kind of Gajan performance. The word also means “debgraho” or a small room for God. In Dinajpur District “Gambhira” is temple of village God, but in Malda District, this temple is especially meant for Lord Shiva. This room is usually kept in darkness and in the evening lightened with a small lamp. The darkness creates fear in the villagers, and they are advised to keep distance from the room. But, in Gambhira performances, it is seen that these village people are transgressing this distance between them and the God they worship. Villagers call God their maternal father, creating strong familial connection with him. They

mock his physical appearance and habit of smoking “ganja”, an illicit drug consisting of the dried leaves of the hemp plant and living carelessly in “samsan” or cremation ground with ashes wrapped all around his body.

Gambhira discharges the responsibility of depicting joys and distresses, of protesting against violence and injustice by speaking the truth, like an ideal journalist, with the aim of protecting the democratic rights of the common people.

“But the King and Hakim

Have made us like crows and buffaloes

And have reduced us to slaves.

Please make all subjects and kings equal” (De, 2021).

By functioning as the representative of society for its well-being, they confess guilt to Vola, another name of Lord Shiva. The Gods and Goddesses presented here are localised. Lord Shiva is often presented as nana who listens to their objections and gives solutions, and sometimes becomes the representative of corrupt and indifferent politicians. Significantly, the themes of these songs range from the utmost domestic and local to the national and international issues; from domestic violence, natural calamity, to human trafficking; from the revolutions of Singur and Nandigram to distressing situation of the Emergency. It played an important role in the Indian freedom movement, too. Not only that, the Gambhira songs contributed much in the progress of the drama of educated Bengal.

These folk elements are crucial for their literary and socio-cultural values as they question the existing belief system, ideologies and power relations. Most of the people connected with these folk forms are illiterate, but they are potential philosophers as they have language, common and good sense, popular religion and folklore – the elements that together constitute spontaneous philosophy. Gambhira song writers and performers can be considered as philosophers because they prompt critical reflection through their creations in order to make common people understand deep-rooted societal values and different perspectives to assess the world. Their narratives represent the communities’ fundamental values, beliefs, thought process and varied experiences of life itself to provide a moral framework to guide behaviour, much like a philosopher who indulges in wondrous engagement to look at reality anew.

Philosophers dive deep into the unresolved questions and mysteries regarding humanity's deepest longings and anxieties, while Gambhira, as a folk performance, addresses larger problems by representing life in its colourful canvas of folk-art form. The Gambhira poets and artists are called philosophers because they are not only indulging in thinking for creating art, but they make the common people think about the diverse natural and physical world.

In the beginning, the illiterate villagers did not have access to any kind of print or digital media. To these people, folk songs, folk theatres, or any other kind of folk art form had been extremely popular and revered medium to get connected with the rest of the world. That was the only medium to get educated via all these platforms, which spread awareness regarding religion, societal issues and most importantly politics. It is true that Gambhira was primarily created out of religious rituals, but with the passing time it extended itself to the faults, the dualities of society, they face and to the problems and its solutions (Ghosh, 2017).

There are many terms in Gambhira songs which are specifically used in Malda district and in the nearby places. So, it is impossible for people from other places to fully appreciate the meaning of these songs. But it is always the thematic wholeness and completeness of the artistic endeavour of the creators that people overcome the barrier of language and get taste of the art. The themes of these songs are generally revolve around unbiased and independent points of view. Educating the mass with social consciousness remains the main concern. Two major song writers, Md Sufi Rahaman (Sufi Master) and Md. Soleman (Soleman doctor), for example, freed themselves from the rigid boundary of religiosity and practiced writing from impartial point of view. They criticised wrongdoing of all political parties and of people with different opinions, not judging them based on their religious identities. Initially, the songs were made to target the social and moral deviations of any powerful person in society because people can easily recognise, associate and get interested in these small, rather significant events as compared to broader social or national issues. It is only after the 2nd World War that themes which demanded social and political concerns were introduced into the scenario.

Social environment plays crucial role in the proper establishment of these artistic pieces. The illiterate or the half-educated villagers who are the targeted audiences of these performances come to see the reflections of their own toiling days, their social, cultural and economic struggles. In spite of the fact that in the beginning of the 21st century newspaper and television started to reach the remote places of the distant villages, but these people were mostly unaware of the broader national and international issues. That is why folk songs, folk dance,

“kothokatha” (village storytelling), folk drama, yatra and other forms of folk art played remarkable role in developing their socio-economic and political concerns. Gambhira has been working as a social educator on religion, society and politics. The insightful song writers are not scholars or intellectuals, but they guide people by showing their own day-to-day saga of hardship. The socio-political ups and downs are always reflected in these different forms of Bengali folk culture, and suppression and pain caused by these events have always stirred the consciousness of these artists (Sarkar, 1917). This is mostly traced in the creations of the colonial era, when the writers and performers voiced their anger and oppression through their art. The English government tried every possible means to control the effects caused by the spread of the songs that aware people against colonial rule and its exploitations. As a result, the contemporary English Magistrate H. A. Burnwell arrested the popular Gambhira artists Gobindalal Seth and Motor Babu.

Hindus and Muslims unitedly performing on the same stage was a powerful message against the policy of the British colonial power, which infamously embraced the strategy of deliberately increasing and emphasising social, religious and ethnic divisions to weaken and exploit collective power (Bandyopadhyay, 1991). A Muslim performer vehemently insulting Hindu God as a liar or a thief, stealing nation’s wealth was considered neither as an offence, nor a point of hurting Hindu religious sentiment because everybody concerned had accepted that Gambhira is not mere songs of worship but rather a powerful political space that highlights the fruitlessness of the politics of religious identity, putting emphasis on interfaith harmony even in the face of utter turbulence of partition of India, specifically of Bengal (Basu, 2019). In a way that helped Gambhira to transgress one specific religious boundary to become a much wider socio-political space that accommodates multiple cultural identities and experiences of varied communities. It is a shared social space that is open, mobile, flexible and lively. Before the partition of Bengal people from other communities like Muslims and Christians enthusiastically participated in the performances, though they did not directly participate in the rituals of worship. After the partition when the whimsical border was imposed on them, certain changes were introduced in the older format of the structure of Gambhira. Gambhira of Malda still features a conversation between Shiva and peasants, and the other side in Bangladesh took up the trope of the grandfather/grandson, but on both sides, it continued to function as a medium to air their grievances against people in power. Exploitation, corruption, inflation, food shortage, unemployment, misery in refugee camps during and post partition era were the crucial issues that made them one (Roy, 2018).

The misfortune brought by the imperial colonial rule was a shared experience, and everybody needed to utilise this powerful platform from where they aired their voice against miseries and oppression, they went through

“Shiva, you shrewdly made the two groups fight!

And we are fighting our brothers all because of your charm.

Listen, brothers, Hindu and Muslim, be aware

If we ignore Shiva, he will go back!” (De, 2021).

What triggered them to experience this oneness, is the real sense of the term “dharma”. It is not just formality between the god and the human, rather it is a medium to ensure that if the poor, illiterate and the lower caste people are paying their hard-earned homage and taxes to the God or the government, it is their right to get benefits of a welfare society (Guha, 1983). Amar Mandal, one of the famous Gambhira performers of Malda District says, “O Shiva, Gambhira is not for worshipping you. It is a weapon to fight against everything wrong in this world”. Describing the plight of Partition, Upendranath Das writes:

“Shiva, how will we bear this plight?

We were happy in our mother’s arms,

But you destroyed our peace

Dividing our country, you made brothers quarrel;

But not India is a graveyard, and Bangladesh is ablaze,

And here we are, left crying in the middle.” (De, 2021).

In 1945, the District Magistrate of Malda issued an order to ban Gambhira as they were vehemently criticising the corrupt bureaucrats and racketeers of Malda who had illegally hoarded food during the great famine of Bengal in 1943. Songs were banned and notebooks of performers were confiscated. Along with that, they were being watched, routinely harassed, threatened with arrest, and even issued orders not to appear in any public performances (Mukhopadhyay, 1945). In spite of these several attacks on their artistic expressions, Gambhira

earned so much love from the common people that they hummed those songs on streets, defying government's fury. Gambhira has a long history as a social weapon, and it did not stop even when facing tough time in the face of imperialistic attack. There is little more in Gambhira than "dancing, singing, masquerading and general merriment" as Lambourn argues.

Shiva is often considered a rural figure or a ploughman, but after the 15th century, with the influence of the Puranic Renaissance and classical literature, his image evolved to that of a middle-class head of a family, performing his duties as a husband and father, the head of the house with the responsibility of all other family members. The portrayal of Shiva in Bengali literature is deeply intertwined with the social customs and cultural shifts within Bengal, particularly the growing importance of the middle class. Later on, the figure of Shiva started to be used as a distant metaphor representing colonial power. This metaphor functions as a shield for the artists to fulfil their aim. In songs, people aggressively demanded going back of Shiva to his own place. This makes people feel the urgency to free themselves from the oppressive colonial rule:

"O Bhola, if we get freedom,

We will give you good, sweet bananas,

Or else rotten, seedy ones.

If we get freedom, Bhola,

We will fill your bag with weed (*siddhi*),

Sweetmeats, Tanda's *khaja* [a kind of fried sweet]

Dhiren Babu's fine *ganja* [weed]

Or else, seedy bananas" (De, 2021).

It remembers how the sly and wicked Englishman came in the disguise of a businessman but gradually captured the entire power much like Shiva who is outwardly very innocent and all the time acting like a forgetful beggar or a hemp smoker but beneath this deceptive image lies the true face. He receives food, offerings and respect, but in return, does not perform his assigned duty of helping people achieve quality life by fostering prosperity and happiness. People are witnessing lack of transparency and accountability, so they are

expressing their grudge against God and crying out for the end of corruption to ensure security of their social, political, economic and civil rights:

“The old man gets no respect in his beloved India

Congress harasses him all day

And asks him to quit India!

I clasp my hands before you: please go away

Go back to your Kailash!

Why are you so bothered about us?

Srimanta says, all will be well

If you leave our country” (De, 2021).

Shiva is also presented as a symbol of political leader who is playing deaf and dumb to all the corruption and distress happening in the society, for which their never-ending greed is responsible. When Shiva appears on the stage, the other performers out of grudge refuse to recognize him by saying “uta ke bote? Mathai jota, petta mota, hate sota” (who is he? With matted hair, fat belly and “trishul” in hand). Shiva is mocked as a film star or a madman, living with dead bodies in cremation ground. In response to the endless complaints against him for some help, he tries to escape to take rest. For this, he has been forced to go back to his home in Kailash. Now, when he is hoping to get a shelter somewhere, the artists give him advice to stay in the station platform, but the construction of the station is so poor that the roof can be blown away anytime. This shows the true face of the political leaders and all the constructions they are making for the development of India.

People are witnessing the demise of the post-independence dream due to corruption in all fields. On one hand, the country has ambitious multimillion-dollar construction projects, and on the other hand, housing for the construction workers, reeking of poverty and starvation. People are awestruck as they continuously experiencing a jarring contrast. They find themselves lost in price-hike crisis, distress of educated yet unemployed young people, and

regular denial of basic healthcare facilities (Lambourn, 1918). Gambhira raises pressing questions regarding these vital issues to break through this inescapable situation:

“Rice, dal, salt, oil

Ended us in all ways

Price is like fire

People are not getting jobs

Luck is not happy” (De, 2021).

Gambhira in the form of satire employs arguments intending to persuade its audience. There is a strong kinship between satire and moral philosophy. Here, laughter serves as an effective tool for the development of the collective identity of protesters and strengthens their socio-political movements in both open democratic structures and harsh repressive regimes and thus it becomes a weapon of the weak. As Binoy Kumar Sarkar considers Gambhira not as a mere medium of entertainment, but as a way of constructing ethical and political ideas. Through the lens of Gambhira, these artists project the common fate of all poor, illiterate and lower caste Hindus and Muslims who share this political space, defying social, religious and national boundaries.

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