

Gambhira: A Study of Localized Culture of Malda in Bengali Folklore

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Abstract: *Gambhira, a performing art, originally from Chapai Nawabganj of Bangladesh, is very popular around Malda district of West Bengal and nearby districts of Rajshahi and Naogaon in Bangladesh. The songs document the history of the region, language and culture of its people. It has been a source of social awareness about contemporary issues amongst people of grassroots level of the remotest corner of Bengal. Gambhira reflects the deeply rooted understanding of the regional culture of Malda district, which has a unique history and position with respect to geographical location. Gambhira enacts the life of the masses and critically analyses their struggle with different perspectives through a satirical approach. Literature has always taken inspiration from life. Therefore this paper of mine will focus on studying various aspects of Gambhira to understand the impact of localization on literature.*

Methodology: Besides watching several performances of *Gambhira*, reading and textual analysis of the narratives of *Gambhira* has been done. Historiography of the folklore has been considered after sorting literature and resources are contextualized to determine the key characteristics of the article. Comparative analysis and textual interpretation have been adopted as part of the literature research approach.

Keywords: Gambhira, Bengali Folklore, Localized Culture, People of Malda

‘Folklore’ refers to the traditional knowledge of myth, tales and practice of a group of people or community who are linked to each other on the basis of religion, region, caste or language. Bengali folklore constitutes a major portion of Bengali literature, which can be further categorized into many sections based on the traditional approach or linguistic variations of the large province of Bengal. Folktales are considered to be part of rural culture often passed down from one generation to another through oral tradition. Folk literature frequently uses mnemonic methods, linguistic patterns, and stylistic motifs because it is mostly oral in nature. Bengali folk literature encompasses various forms of epic, poetry, and theatre, as well as folktales, ballads, proverbs, and other works that have existed in pre-partition Bengal. Besides Baul, Bhatiali, Bhawaiya, kavigan, ghatu gan, jhumur, baramasi, meyeli git, jatra gan, sari gan, *Gambhira* is a popular folklore, still treasured as part of Bengali literature and culture.

Gambhira, a folk-theatrical form of performing arts, that has its roots in Chapai Nawabganj in Bangladesh, is highly appreciated as a cultural heritage in Malda district of West Bengal and its neighbouring Bangladeshi districts of Rajshahi and Naogaon. *Gambhira* as a folklore not only serves the purpose of entertainment but also acts as a medium of protest against socio-political oppression. The class struggle of the local inhabitants, complaining to the ‘Nana’ (Shiva) against social ill-practice, has been the traditional storyline of the masked dance drama since ancient days. The form has been chosen by freedom fighters, social reformers and many other performers to raise voice against the exploitation of the working class people.

Etymologically ‘*gambhir*’ means a serious affair in Bengali. Lord Shiva in Hindu mythology is also called by this name. This connects the art form with tradition and its purpose as a tool for protest or engaging in serious debatable issues. The performance includes dialogue, song and dance between two or more characters surrounded by chorus, asking for help or complaining to ‘*nana*’ (lovingly addresses Shiva). Subject of the discussion ranges, from social issues like witch or bride burning to infanticide, from natural disaster like flood or draught to man-made disaster like war or sexual violence, economic inflation to political drama. The use of mythological characters connects it with the traditional forms while the other characters are very much local. The local dialect brings in a regional flavour to the performance. Though the form uses the character of ‘Nana’, that is Shiva from Hindu mythology, to describe their problems and ask for solutions, the art form is secular in its approach, in dealing with the social issues of the contemporary period. It has a homely association with the locales making it immensely popular among all sections of people. It seems like an exchange of dialogue between man and his creator, surpassing the knowledge and wisdom to create a balance in the society. The satirical tone and the use of slang is the extension of the

entertaining factor of the performance. Just like comedy defined by Aristotle, it represents human beings as 'worse than they are,' depicting some form of 'laughable error' or discomfort, which causes the spectator to feel something, either amusement or embarrassment.

Bengal has a rich tradition of masked dance spreading from Darjeeling, Dacca, Parulia, Chittaganj to Malda. The mask of Malda is presumably the earliest. The *Gambhira* or '*Mukhanaach*' masquerade is generally staged on the *Baro-Tamasha* night.¹ It isn't really a mask-dance in the traditional sense. Some dancers wear masks while others do not. Both solo and group dancing are present. It is directly analogous to the Elizabethan 'Masque' of the 16th and early 17th centuries in Europe, which was a festive courtly performance involving music, dancing, singing, and acting performed on a lavish stage set with elaborate set design and architectural framing created by a renowned architect to present a patron-flattering allegory. The major difference between *Gambhira* and Masque lies in the temperament of the show as the former is used as a satire while the latter is an act of flattery.

2

From the earliest days of civilization, songs have been an integral part of expressing emotion and depicts the shadow of sociocultural habits of the period. It is a marker of the social values and moral response of the population. Songs are considered to be an important resource of popular culture and literature. Folklore shows how central figures deal with problems or crises that arise in the course of their normal lives. Folk literature, said simply, is about unique experiences from a specific society. Folk Culture is deeply rooted in the spectacle of such experiences. Folk culture encompasses verbal and nonverbal, tangible and inanimate parts of civilization. The analysis of agrarian history, settlement patterns, dialectology of folk speech, folk architecture, folk cooking, folk costumes, the notion of time in folk society, i.e., the folk year, folk religion, folk medicine, folk recreation, folk literature, folk play, and the folk arts and crafts are all included in any attempt to study folk culture in its true sense. The list is not exhaustive, but it does indicate that the field of folk culture encompasses the entirety of way of life.

*"Whence dost the Gosain hail
Where is thy stay
Sans food, sans water? Yet
Comest thou day after day.
Sans water, sans land void everywhere.
Stayest thou, on camphor,
and is thy food air?"ⁱⁱ*

Just like the ancient theatrical festival, the Great Dionysia that was performed at Athens in March in honour of Dionysus, the god of wine, *Gambhira* is dedicated to the God of destruction, Lord Shiva. Through its comic and satirical dramatic form, it challenges the established notions of society and asks for breaking the ill-practices of hypocritical society. It has been widely used and improvised to utilize for social good to create consciousness amongst the masses. The role of

Chorus, just like the Greek dramas, is to hammer the words in the mind of the audience to bring out collective voice or consciousness about the prevalent socio-cultural tension. They are strategically used to connect the audience with the agenda and include their soulful participation in the protest. During the 'partition of Bengal' movement, the people of Malda stood in solidarity with the freedom fighters and revolted against the British. Malda was one of the most affected regions of partition and its people lost their homes and possessions. The narrative of loss of the silk traders and weavers of Malda became marginal and disappeared from the pages of history but their struggle remained documented in the local folktales. The inspirational vigour in their songs urged people of all gender, caste and religion to participate in the movement.

*"biwi saheb, biwi saheb, dhar dhar desher charkha.
Deshar kaj korte na laj, char char char borkha.
Mian sahib mian sahib, ajgubi kol enecheh notun,
Ete bilati indur porbe mara, dekhechhi swapan."ⁱⁱⁱ*

[Free English translation: Addressing the female population of the region, asking them to come out of the purdah system to participate in the Swaraj Charkha movement as there is no shame in doing work for the

motherland. Also addressing the male population to be part of it as they feel 'charkha' or khadi movement can help in ending trade of the colonizers and end their reign in India.]

This song was banned for using the term '*bilati indur*' (foreign rat) indicating the colonizers and the Md. Sufi, the poet-singer of the *Gambhira* group was arrested for a while. On imprisonment during colonial period, they raised their voice against the brutality of the British,

*"Bina karone dhore ene ekhane kosto diccho keno prane [hey]
Ki oporadhe rekhechho bandhya kon dosher doshi more dui jone?"^{iv}*

[Free English translation: Why have you imprisoned us and torturing our soul without any justified reason? What is our crime that has imprisoned the two of us?]

During the Swadeshi period Benoy Kumar Sarkar, the son of the soil and an eminent economist, chose *Gambhira* to promote the national spirit among *Bengalee*. He used this mechanism of folk theatre to educate the rural and illiterate masses about the real intention of the British behind the proposed Bengal partition in 1905. The narrative structure of the folk-theatre helped in mass gathering, adult education and thought provoking addresses to create political organization. *Gambhira* would awaken the mass about Swaraj movement as it is said,

*"Swaraj jodi pai hai Bhola
Khaite dibo aam aar kola
Shib he! Swaraj pele monad debo
Ghono dudher bati debo
Noile kachkola, o bhola o bhola!"^v*

[Free English Translation: If we gain independence (Swaraj) Hey Lord! you will be served mangoes and bananas. Hey Shib, on achieving Swaraj, you will also be served with sweets and offerings, otherwise you get an unripe banana signifying nothing (unripe banana is a colloquial term used to signify absolute nothing).]

Gambhira shapes traditional poetry and handicraft, educating the general populace's tastes. It became a voice of the marginalized and an influencing platform reforming the social evils. It has created an alternative narrative of the local history and culture, and enriched pages of Bengali literature.

The language of *Gambhira* is interesting and attractive enough to draw the attention of the listeners but simple and full of colloquial words to enhance reach amongst the masses. It carries the flavour of local culture and their language. The sociolinguistic study of the language shows that it is patriarchal in nature and mostly talks about the prejudiced notion of a primitive marginalized class fighting for their rights. Folklores of a particular geographical space provide the scope to the recent trend of studying culture to evaluate and contextualize any historical or political event. As a matter of case study of the region, *Gambhira* brings out a deep connection of the district with partition. The underdeveloped condition of the geographical place is mainly traced back to the state of refugees from Bangladesh during partition and the Bangladesh Liberation war of 1971 and currently to the heavy erosion of Ganga in this particular region. The loss of property, belongings, homeland and economic status is a recurrent theme of the narrative besides corruption, unemployment and other such issues. Demographic representation of Malda population includes people from various backward classes, refugees, scheduled caste or minor communities. Therefore the saga of oppression, exploitation, discrimination and deprivation is common to the geographical belt and is manifested in the cultural of protest.

*"O Shiva! Listen O father!
In great misery do I call upon you.
Listen with your ear and with your heart
Listen to your poor son,
O great pashupati let these miseries be undone
Leaving your heavenly abode descend to our land
Our country is free they say yet I can see no freedom
Everywhere there is corruption, guile and slavery
All the layers and all the people and all administration*

India is in troubles great,
Pakistan shall leave Kashmir at no rate.
This ism will destroy the nation,
And destroy in name of devotion.
In this pain I sing to you tappa gaan,
In order to keep up with foreign currency rate
The rates of gold are revised,
All things are extremely high priced,
The goldSmith"s trade is about to die.
O listen! to their helpless cry.
The taxes are on high rise,
The whole market is overpriced.
Labours and farmers, who relentlessly soil,
Are stolen of their cryings and have no potatoes to boil." vi

The stage settings and attire of *Gambhira* is minimal and limited as it depicts the story of the marginalized and deprived class of people like Rajbangshi, Chai, Poundra, Koch, Mahali Pole et cetera community.^{vii} Even the use of rejected torn dresses is iconoclastic and criticizing the 'babu' culture of colonial Bengal. The revolt of the agricultural labour against the landlord is also manifested in their voice. The music is loud and clear whereas the chorus is used to emphasize on the word of the narrator and create a refined connection with the audience. Drums and cymbals are the main musical instruments while the narrators wear anklets to give rhythm in all the dances.

Haridas Palit, renowned researcher of the literary research department of *Malda Jatiyo Shikha Samiti*, along with Benoy Kumar Sarkar traced the history of this theatrical art form and connected *Gambhira* to the cultural history of Vedic period. References of songs have been found from mediaeval literature of Bengal till contemporary. Impact of Buddhism and other political upheaval is evident within the narrative. The art form has also gone through many transitional phases. In his book "*Addyer Gambhira*," Palit made the following comment: "In earlier times, the home that resembled a *chandimandap* was used to refer to 'gambhiri' or *gambhira*." (Self-translated) Under the reign of the second Dharmapal Deb and Gabinda Chandra, in the provinces of Gour, Rangpur, and Dinajpur, *Gambhira* was part of an experience of dwelling in the *Chandi Mandap*.^{viii} The name '*Gambhira*' refers to a "house of God" where religious rituals were once performed. "*Addyer Gambhira*" in Malda district replaced the "*Gajan Utsav*" of the Rarh region. It also resembles '*tamasha*', the traditional form of Marathi theatre. Historicity of the institution of *Gambhira* has located its origin in The Ramayana and The Mahabharata too.^{ix}

Gambhira is usually performed during the last few days of Chaitra, the last month of Bengali year. First day that is 26th of Chaitra is the day of '*Ghat vara*' pitcher-pouring; 27th Chaitra, the second day is Miniature Drama/Show '*Chhoto Tamasa*', 28th Chaitra, the third Day is Big Drama/Show '*Baro Tamasa*' and the final day on 29th Chaitra ends with '*Ahara/Bolai/Bolbai*' songs.^x It situates the narrative as the combined experience of the whole year before narrating to 'nana', so that the advice and blessing can save the coming year. Improvisation of the narrative creates a tangible problem in the process of documentation and therefore it has remained an oral tradition. Lack of documentation caused loss of historical evidence of cultural history on many occasions. Few groups through generations are trying to preserve the culture through memoryscape but ritualistic play remains alive because of its power to voice the relevant issues of contemporary society. History takes the back foot compared to the spontaneity of the situation of the musical drama.

The most significant part of the folklore is transmission. The method of transmitting folklore is crucial. Without the group sharing these values and practices over time and location, they would become fragments of culture that would only be of interest to cultural anthropologists. These folk objects are still being passed down informally, almost always anonymously, and in various forms. The folk group is not individualistic; rather, it is grounded in community and cultivates its lore there. Traditional expressions have been classified as folklore for a long time, and the term has taken on different meanings as a result of modernity, industrialism, nationalism, colonialism, and cultural literacy. Folklore is a result of a social group's common identity, in contrast to high culture, where any single work by a designated artist is protected by copyright law. People prefer to assign more solidarity to members of their own linguistic community because language

is an essential marker of social identity, especially when that community is vibrant or growing. *Gambhira* is no exception and in spite of the language attitude, the use of the local dialects solidifies the cultural attributes of the region and infers a cultural identity to the locales. The practice contextualizes connotative meaning characteristic of a folkloric frame of localized knowledge and insider view. The relevance of the institute of *Gambhira* lies in addressing the social issues in the larger social, political and economic scenario. In the digital age, the art form is struggling to keep its popular status as a medium of creating popular opinion and spreading ideology through 'friendly transmission'. The dialogic debate of the open platform allows freedom of expression and contradictory views beyond any restrictions. As Sarkar manifested "... (*Gambhira*) promote largely the national spirit of the *Bengalee* people".^{xi} It significantly has enriched the regional, ethnographical and cultural representation of Gour Bengal in Bengali language and literature as it says,

"Maldake diyechhe sanman , resham
Gambhira ar fozli aam"^{xii}

[Free English translation: Malda is renowned for its silk, *Gambhira* and varieties of mangoes.]

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BIO-NOTE

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