

A Study on Gambhira Dance and Artisans: An Intangible Cultural Heritage Resource of Malda District, West Bengal

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ABSTRACT

Folklore is the body of culture shared by a particular group of people; it encompasses the traditions common to that culture, subculture, or group. It includes oral traditions, such as tales. It contains tales and legends. The original term "folklore" was rural, illiterate, and poor (Wikipedia, Google). Folk dances of West Bengal harmonize the beautiful culture of the State through their colors and celebration. In the ancient past, folk dances were either agricultural or devotional. Nowadays, several socio-political problems influence folk dances. Prevalent folk dances of West Bengal are Chau dance of Puruliya District, Santhali dance at Sonajhurihaat of Birbhum district, Gambhira dance of Malda district, Durga Puja Dhak Dance, Gajan, Aalkap, etc. Gambhira of Malda district is an intangible cultural heritage resource where the holy devotional dance is done by worshipers of Shakti (Goddess Chandi). Gambhira seems like a documentary-dance course or folk play, a mixture of all kinds of art forms, like dance, dialogues, songs, and music. Gambhira performers use melodic instruments like flute, *dhaak*, cornet, and harmonium. This article researches the dynamics of Gambhira's evolution by emphasizing the role of artisans and tourism in the growth of Gambhira in promoting this famous folk drama worldwide.

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Introduction:

The Gambhira festival is famous in North Bengal and some parts of Bangladesh, such as Rangpur, Pabna, and Rajshahi. North Bengal covers the districts of Malda, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, and Coach-Bihar. Lord Shiva is worshipped during the Gambhira festival. The term Gambhira means the room or space of worship. Gambhira is considered one of the foremost festivals of the Malda district.

There are several opinions about the origin of the Gambhira festival. Haridas Palit had used the term 'Adyer Gambhira.' According to him, Gambhira is the other name of Lord Shiva. That is why Shiva's festival is called Gambhira. Another meaning of Gambhira is the worship of Shiva in a completely dark room.

Haraprasad Shastri stated the Gambhira festival came from Buddhist culture. Asutosh Bhattacharya traced its root in Surya puja (an ancient ritual), where Sun God is worshipped. According to some Gambhira artists of the Malda district, Gambhira songs originated in the Bhoalahat of Bangladesh. Gambhira may also have come from "Gamira," for example; Gamira is a solo song in the district of Jalpaiguri.

Study Area

Malda lies in the east of the confluence of the Mahananda and Kalindri rivers. The latitudinal and longitudinal extension of Malda district (Gateway of North Bengal) is 24°40'20"N-25°32'08"N and 87°45'50"E-88°28'10"E, respectively. According to the Surveyor General of India, the district's total area is

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3733 sq. km, and the entire population is 3290468 (Census of India, 2001). The district is bounded on the north by the Purba (district of West Bengal), on the south by Murshidabad, on the east by South Dinajpur and North Dinajpur (district of West Bengal) and Rajshahi (Bangladesh), and on the west by Murshidabad, the Santhal Paraganas. On the route of Darjeeling, 349 km north of Kolkata, lies Malda, famous for the ruined cities of Gour and Hazrat Pandua; although it is more famous for its large Fazli mangoes and Gambhira folk songs. Many picturesque heritage relics are still pronouncing their glorious ancient stories. With its glorified history and heritage buildings (monuments, mosques, etc.), Gambhira folk drama, and large Fazli mangoes, Malda has the potential of an important tourist destination worldwide.

Aims and Objectives of the Study

The following are the basis of the present research:

1. Study about the Gambhira of the Malda district.
2. Study about the past and present-day conditions of the Gambhira artists.
3. Survey the existing conditions of Gambhira artists.
4. Evaluate the scope of developing the economic status of Gambhira artists.
5. Promote the Gambhira festival as an essential element for creating heritage tourism in the Malda district.

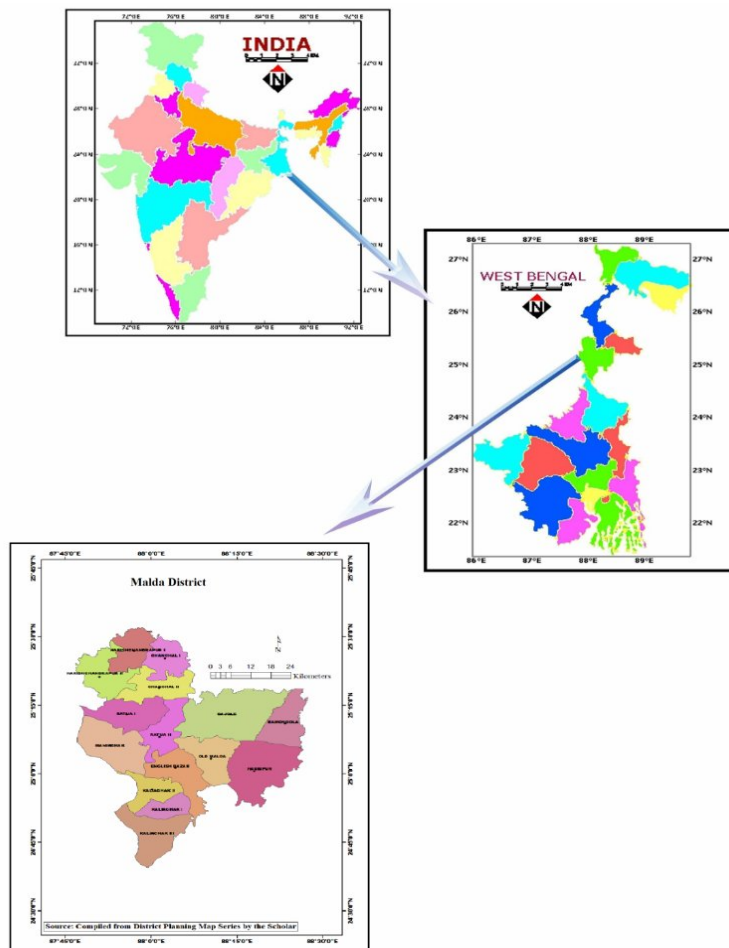


Fig. 1: Location Map of Study Area

Database and Methodology

The study attempts to analyze the existing current status of the Gambhira festival and dance from the perspective of the development of heritage tourism in the Malda district. Primary and secondary data are analyzed to fulfill the study's objectives. The methodology of research is both statistical and cartographic.

The secondary data for the study include books, journals, maps, and statistical handbooks published by the Bureau of Applied Economics and Statistics and Gazetteers. But the data on Gambhira is not available from such sources. So, primary data is the only source of Gambhira-related information. Therefore, I prepared several questionnaires to collect preliminary data and conducted surveys regarding Gambhira artists. In addition, district planning maps, national atlas and thematic mapping organisation (NATMO) maps, satellite images, and other published maps are used to generate new maps as per the requirements of the study.

Structure of Gambhira Festival

Gambhira festival has two crucial parts. The first part includes worship of Lord Shiva and its related rituals; the second includes songs and dances with dramatic performances. This festival continues for four or seven days before Chaitra Sankranti (9th April to 13th April) and ends on Chaitra Sankranti (14th April) through Charak Puja.

The first part of the festival includes five different rituals. These are as follows:

1. **Ghat Bhara (26th Chaitra):** On that day, a clay pot is taken to the nearest pond, and after filling with water, it is kept in the place where the Puja is performed.
2. **Chhoto Tamasha (27th Chaitra):** The worship of Hara-Parvati is done on the following day and is called 'Chhoto Tamasha.'
3. **Bada Tamasha (28th Chaitra):** The worship of Hara-Parvati continues on day three. In the afternoon, the processions of pilgrims with Mask-Dance are performed. Different characters from Ramayan and Mahabharata are enacted. The masks are mainly made of clay; sometimes, makeup also substitutes the mask on the face. Pradyat Ghosh, in his book *Lokasanskriti O Gambhira: Punarbichar*, has mentioned that Gambhira masks are also

made of wood, mainly the margosa tree (or neem), the fig tree (or *dumur*), clay, and sola (sponge wood). Kali, Narashinghi, and Chamunda masks are made of wood. *Hanuman*, *Bura-Buri*, *Ram-Seeta*, *Ram-Laxman*, and *Jahura Kali* masks are sola, tin, and clay. In the Gambhira festival, the Hanuman dance is performed in the evening wearing masks.

4. **Ahara (29th Chaitra):** It is the 4th day of the festival, where again, the worship of *Hara-Parvati* is done. Serving food to Brahmins and unmarried girls (as they were treated as Goddess *Parvati*) was also part of that day. Therefore, this day is called 'Ahara,' i.e., providing meals to Brahmins and unmarried girls.
5. **Chadaka Puja (Chaitra Sankranti):** It is the festival's last day, where a person is tied with a hook (*Borshi*) on his back and then moved around a bar with a long rope.

According to Pradyat Ghosh, Gambhira song has six parts: Mukhopad (Introduction), Bandana, Dwaita, Charyaari, Palabandi Gaan and Khabar. Fani Paul has segregated the Gambhira song into six parts: Shiva Bandana, Saltamami, Toppa, Charyaari, Dwaitageet, and Lokanatya. A Gambhira artist, Laxman Sutradhar, has stated that this song has five scenes as follows:

1. **Shiva Bandana:** In the ancient period, prayer was done to Lord Shiva in the 'Bandana' chapter. But, two important Gambhira artists, Sufi Master and Md. Soleman explored this song in secularism perimeter without keeping it in a particular religion. For this reason, the Shiva Bandana has been transformed into the 'Bhola bandana' at present. The Gambhira artists changed Lord Shiva from Godship to Bholanath to be a close person to the devotees.
2. **Charyaari:** In this, four speakers perform a fact or incident (either it may be political, social, or contemporary issues), out of which only one person speaks the truth, representing the real reason for the fact.
3. **Duet:** Two speakers narrate folk while performing the role of husband and wife.
4. **Taunting:** Contemporary political topics are discussed in this scene.

5. **Report:** The current news on social crime and corruption is delivered to the audience in this scene. Therefore, it is treated as a valuable medium to apprise people about the earlier topics.

In this last episode of Gambhira, the different themes related to various new information and unjust and illegal activities of society and citizenry are discussed: early marriage, election campaigns, the importance of polio vaccination, and health education-oriented subjects. According to J. C. Sengupta, 'songs are composed every year dealing with local issues, including the local administrator's example, Satish Chandra Agarwala, a local businessperson in the Malda district, started a business illegal cement from 1946 to 47. The then Gambhira artisans collected all news regarding the company. The facts of the illicit business were the theme of the following Gambhira performance. Late Gobinda Lal Seth prepared the songs on that illegal business, and the Kutubpur Gambhira party performed those songs and drama. They wisely chose the venue adjacent to the bungalow of the District Magistrate. After the end of Gambhira songs, the administration started an active investigation and caught Satish Chandra Agarwala and punished him.

Structure of Gambhira Drama

Gambhira is a folk musical theater or *oyatra* in the Malda district. The presentation of Gambhira is based on a musical theater cast. The audiences leave about 14/12/16 as part of the eagle's feet and sit on the ground. Within this context, the Gambhira festival is structured. The drama is divided into six parts: Mukhopado, Shiva Vandana, Duet, Charyari, Palabondigan, and Report.

The five main types of dance forms of Gambhira are initiation, worship, physical movements, Lahar, and Bishram (leave-taking). Another seven dance forms are Kali, Chamunda, Narsinghi, Basuli Ugrachanda, Gridhini Bishan, and Mahishasur Mardini. Earlier, the audience left about 14/12/16 as part of the eagle's feet and sat on the ground. But in recent days, Gambhira is also performed on stage.

During the performance of Gambhira songs sung, these are called Gambhira songs. A chorus accompanies the song. The singers are standing backstage. The costumes worn during the performance are very bare. Both artisans wear a *lungi* (a long piece of cotton cloth wrapped around the waist and extending to the ankles). The grizzly-bearded grandfather wears a straw hat and has a stick in his hand. The grandson



Fig. 2: Gambhira artists performing a programme against child marriage organized by State Government

wears a ragged jersey and has a *gamchha* (a locally checked towel) around his waist.

Gambhira dances include solo dance, group dance, and mask dance. In this folk play, there are two principal dancers, one who dances Siva (remains essentially a friend and guardian of the familiar people) or Nana (maternal grandfather), and another is Nati (grandson). It is a descriptive Gambhira dance, as both use dialogues to express their feelings to indicate their role in society in different aspects. Gambhira form is often performed before an image or picture of Siva is installed in a hut open on three sides. It begins with a chorus of four singers invoking Lord Shiva. Next, Siva appears undressed-bodied with entwined hair and tiger skin around his waist to listen to complaints in his popular demonstration. Siva allegorically represents the feudal lord or India's Government in today's social context. Next, Siva is often delivered through satiric skits, illustrating that denial was sympathetic to a sympathetic listener, sometimes deprivation, and accusing local and national authorities. Finally, Siva visits the government agencies to plead the villagers' cases.

Another kind of Gambhira that focuses on God and Goddess is the prime Gambhira dance. This is used in the devotion of Lord Shiva and *Parvati*. Another type of Gambhira is the mask Gambhira dance. It can be divided into mythological dance, in which the performers wear masks of Vana, Narsinghi, Kali,

Chamunda, the mythology of Sabitri and Satyaban, Lakshmi, and Saraswati. Narsinghi is the most popular Gambhira mask dance. It is also unique, for the mask of Bengal shares its characteristics. Another is society-related character dance, like old man-woman, and animal-centered dance, like a monkey, snake, tiger, and deer. The Gambhira dancers related to mask dance used to wear *ghungrus*, and only *dhaak* and *kansi* were played.

The two leading dances of the Gambhira festival are the Vana Dance, the Kali, and Narsinghi Dance. The Vana Dance is introductory to all dance performances. A group of people who cleansed their bodies wore sacred attire and performed this dance. First, they pierce the skin on either side of their waist with the pointed iron arrows, usually one and a half feet in length, while uttering mantras. The two ends of these arrows are fastened with iron wear. Then they wrapped the arrowhead with rags immersed in mustard oil and lit it up. Finally, they dance to the beats of the *dhak*. They initiated their performance from the Gambhira mandap and visited all the mandapas and ways of the village. The Kali and Narsinghi Dance Dances are performed differently during the Gambhira festivals. The performers wore *ghagras* or pajamas and dressed as Goddess Kali. The Kali dance forms are based on the tal of 'khemta,' 'adh khemta,' 'choutal,' 'daskoshi,' 'Gridhini Vishal,' 'Daggha-posta,' and 'Dumni-kaharwa.' Narsinghi is a solo dance form and shares many characteristics of Kali.



Fig. 3: Different types of masks are used in Gambhira Dance (Wikipedia, Google)

Past and present scenario of Gambhira Groups and Artisans

Gambhira song began to deteriorate in the three decades before. After independence, the departure of the Sufi master from the field of Gambhira resulted in Gambhira's value. However, after Gopinath Seth and Biswanath Pandit, further innovation is hard to discover in the next period of the composer's works. One of the scariest things is that it is instantly becoming a vote-centered business. Political leaders use Gambhira songs only to increase their vote bank.

Consequently, it has now become only propaganda and flattery instead of critique, which is unfit for the future of Gambhira. Debaprashad Satiyar, the famous artist of Gambhira, once expressed his deep regret that it has instantly become a product for a group of selfish businessmen. They are now working as an agent. During 1999, there were twelve Gambhira groups in Malda. In 2006, eight such groups were registered. A few former artists are still active among these groups, and they have forever been a relatively marginalized group.

Moreover, their position has declined due to the insolvency of poor rural economic status in recent decades. The main challenges they face to maintain their everyday life with this occupation. Most of their artisans changed their control from this genre. Due to unplanned dissemination activities, the young generation feels uninterested in staying involved in this area. These should not be the future of Gambhira songs. Meeting the challenges and keeping this culture alive required proper guidance and preparation. Also required opportunities to keep up through effective platforms, practice and certification through a systematic inventory of all traditional artists and practitioners, presentation and retrieval activities, dissemination activities through electronic media, television, wireless, and organizing seminars also prevent its worsening.

Gambhira song is a musical drama that suggests diverse settings or scenes and presents different conflicts and dramatic actions. The art of playing outstrips the appeal of its music. The principal singers in its performance are two: a grandfather and a grandson. Their witty dialogue depicts all sorts of social and economic evils. It is full of bitter satire and spares none.

The first part of Gambhira is acquainted with the Hindu religion, but the second part of the festival is secular. Gambhira song is open to all classes of people.

Therefore, the Gambhira song is available to all categories of people. Gambhira songs are sung in Malda's local language. The Gambhira performance continues from 2.5 to 3 hours. Gambhira comprises 12 to 14 persons; all are male members. Earlier, only Motor Babu Group had female performers. But, at present, only male members perform in the disguise of females. The performance of Gambhira is either performed in the Shiva temple or in the open field under the tarpaulin shade. The associated instruments like *Dhol*, *Kartal*, Flute, Trumpet, *Khanjani*, and Harmonium are used in performing Gambhira dance. The old and famous Gambhira performers are Biswanath Pandit, Matar Babu, Nirubabu, Md. Sufi and Md Soleman.

In the total Malda area, there are ten to twelve Gambhira troops:

1. Nana He Gambhira troop (Tapan Halder)
2. Bansbari Gambhira Troop (Ashim Roy)
3. Kutubpur Gambhira Troop (Fulbari)
4. Aiho Troop or Netai troop (Aiho)
5. Jadabnagar Loksanskriti Sanstha (Rajkumar Das)
6. Aneswa Cultural Troop (Amal Mandal)
7. Harischandrapur Gambhira Troop
8. Madhughat Gambhira Troop
9. Old Malda Gambhira Troop named as Lubdhak Ekti Sanskritik Prayas
10. Gazole Gambhira Troop

Lakhan Sutradhar, Rajkumar Das, Netai Das, Ashim Roy, Amal Mandal, Tapan Halder, and Bimal Gupta are contemporary Gambhira artists. Although the Gambhira festival is performed at a specific time, the festival usually continues throughout the year at the end of Chaitra (April) for four to seven days. According to Lakhan Sutradhar, 16th Baisakh is a memorable day for Gambhira song in the Malda district. The State Government projected different public awareness programs to general people throughout the year. It is one medium through which education, health, and public awareness of social issues are focused on the public. These songs have gained popularity through Gambhira Parisad Folk Cultural Association through Tara Pada Lahiry, a radio artist. Ashutosh Bhattacharjee is the president, and Pratap Chandra is the secretary of this organization. Its main object was to revive folk

songs of Bengal and give wide publicity at home and abroad.

Obstacles

After a survey, it has been ascertained that Malda's Gambhira artists face various inconveniences, which are enumerated below.

1. As the remuneration of ten to twelve artists is much higher, and the amount is not available all the time, artists are not eager to come into this profession for the apparent reason.
2. The artists cannot fully devote themselves to practice, as they have engaged in the alternative profession.
3. The success of the Gambhira song exclusively depends on the writer, singer, and performance. So, if sufficient time is not spared for increasing the quality, satisfactory success will not be achieved.
4. Different masks and dresses are required for the performance associates, but these cannot be collected due to a lack of monetary funds.
5. Gambhira artists engaged in other profession due to low remuneration

On many occasions, the government performs public awareness programs, but the monetary value of these programs is meager. This factor has created a disinterest among the present generation of professionals.

Recommendation with the Help of Tourism

Gambhira is famous for the folk songs of Malda. As such, the songs cannot be sent to a loss account. For folk songs to survive, different projects are required. The government and local authorities should take the initiative to protect this famous cultural heritage element of this district.

1. Among them, tourism is one of the vital issues. Gambhira song will be highlighted to the cultural loving tourist, who will ultimately attract tourists. Ultimately, Gambhira artists will be economically benefited during the tourist season. Here, the organizer or planner should follow the model of the Sonajhuri hat with tribal song and dance.
2. Government should patronize the Gambhira party with financial aid. It will help artisans financially and mentally. Therefore, they fully engage themselves to improve this folk song.
3. The program will be telecast and broadcast on television and radio to use the Gambhira song for different public awareness. It will be beneficial to promote this heritage resource nationally and globally.

Conclusion

Cultural heritage means the resources inherited from the past and necessary to preserve future generations. Both tangible and intangible heritage resources are present in a country or society. Malda district of West Bengal has many heritage resources, both tangible and intangible. Gambhira is the only intangible cultural heritage resource in this district. Gambhira is a mixture of art forms, like dance, dialogues, songs, and music.



So, it seems like a documentary-dance course or a folk play. The mask-wearing Gambhira of Malda is famous among other Gambhira dance variations. This folk form was initially a potent weapon for common people to express their grievances and aspirations. However, the study reveals that the present generation is not interested in this famous folk culture of the district.

On the other hand, many Gambhira artists are forced to change their job due to uncertainty of income. Therefore, Government and local bodies should take the initiative to preserve this famous cultural heritage. Tourism is the best way to publicize this folk culture in the national and international sectors.

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