

Situating Folk Performances in the Public Domain: An Evaluation of *Gambhira* and *Mughal Tamasha*

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Folk religion has been the driving force behind many folk performances of West Bengal and Odisha. Specially powerful folk god in all such performances has been Lord Shiva. But the anthropomorphic view of the folk god is placed in an altogether new context of social satire. It looks at the introduction of the folk god in the dramatic structure of *Gambhira* and *Mughal Tamasha* from a purely performative aspect in which Shiva becomes a dramatic device or persona as the case may be. Rather, the study closely examines the nature and intensity of intervention of a folk god device in both drama forms in a comparative way and tries to explore respective social configurations that led to such portrayals of popular divinities in folk performances. Comparisons are made often between two kindred art forms. From that point of view, both *Gambhira* and *Mughal Tamasha* merit a comparative study. However, it will be unrewarding to create a fuss over which form is older than the other. It will also be fruitless to locate one performance in purely religious tradition and other in a secular ambience. It gives rise to unwelcome controversies and dissenting voices. These critics maintain that *Mughal Tamasha* is purely secular social satire and much older than *Gambhira* as it originated shortly after the end of Mughal regime during the Maratha rule in Odisha. In reality, these scholars gleefully ignore the much ancient nature of *Gambhira* in Malda district of West Bengal. One finds prevalence of *Gambhira* even

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in the Middle Ages in the rural administrative set up. The oldest form of Gambhira was popularly known as “Chhatrishi Gambhira” (cluster of thirty six Gambhiras). Among the performers of ‘Bind’ community “Baishi Gambhira” (cluster of twenty two Gambhiras) was also prevalent. Bengal District Gazetteer, Malda, of 1921 also vindicated this claim: “It appears that the term *baisi* is even occasionally used to designate a single prominent *mondal*” (32). During the Middle Ages the term ‘*baishi*’ was used with many meanings. The great Baishnav devotee Haridas was flogged in a public place known as ‘*Baish Bazar*’ by the security personnel of Kazi. Reference to Gambhira is found in these times as well. Hence, the debate on ancientness turns out to be quite out of place in a technical discussion on introduction of Shiva as a dramatic persona.

Due to the growing importance of Bhuvaneswar as the political and religious capital of Odisha, there was great enthusiasm among the Odiya connoisseurs of folk drama to introduce and popularize the cult of Lord Shiva in many of the existing folk art forms. *Danda Nata*, a dance performance prevalent among low-caste Hindus of Odisha, was an eminent artistic medium to propitiate Lord Shiva and His consort Gouri. The most sanctimonious dance from in Odisha, however, is *Patua Dance*, involving quite painful physical activities by the dancing devotees. It is related to worship of Lord Shiva, Sarala, Charchika, Chandi and other gods and goddesses. The *Chhau* Dance of Mayurbhanj associates itself with the worship of *Bhairava*, the terror striking image of Lord Shiva. “From the close association of these dances with the worship of gods and goddesses in which people participate in votive dedication, one can easily infer that they were inspired by Shaivism and later by Shaktism when Tantrism had spelt a tremendous influence over the masses” (Pattanaik ii).

If one looks at the political history of Odisha it will be apparent how Shaivism found great favour with the ruling kings since 5th century A.D. The Kesari kings of Odisha ruled over the land from 474 AD to 1132 AD. They patronized Shaivism as the state religion and made all possible efforts to erase the profounder influence of Buddhism that gripped the minds of people because of its popular approach. The kings started building many temples of Shiva and Parvati throughout their territories, and Bhuvaneswar alone developed as a great seat of Shaivism with hundreds of temples all around. The rulers fostered *Pasupata* system of Shaivism founded by Lakulisa in the first half of the 2nd century AD as evident from the epigraphic records. In *Pasupata Sutra* of

Lakulisa we find instruction regarding the religious practices of the Shaivas. Here the devotee is enjoined to dance and sing standing to the south of image with face turned towards north. Thus, we find that the five arts of architecture, sculpture, dance, music and acting were very closely related to Shaivism and its rituals from a very early period of Odiya history. Therefore, it leaves no doubt that all these folk dances of Odisha grew out of this religious fervour. Gradually, a series of complex rituals, fasting, ceremonial procession etc. was attached to the performances as a mark of religious austerity and festivity as well.

All types of folk performance traditions did not enjoy the same kind of artistic success or popular appreciation over the last one-and-a-half century. While *Yatra*, *Prahlad Nata*, *Bharat Leela*, *Radhaprem Leela* and *Suang* - all professional and semi-professional folk performances - have developed into full - fledged folk art forms, *Ram Leela*, *Krishna Leela*, *Raas Leela*, *Mughal Tamasha*, *Dadhi Nata* and *Chadaya Nata* are still an amateur activity. They survive only with the love, devotion and patronage of the rural people.

Krushna Charan Behera, an eminent Odiya researcher on folk drama has authored a book on *Mughal Tamasha* and all its sister folk drama forms. It obviously refers to *Tamasha* or a satirical play on the Mughals. This tradition is confined mainly to a few villages surrounding the town of Bhadrak in Odisha where there is concentration of Muslim population. It is Raja Mansingh who defeated the Afghans and established Mughal rule in Odisha. But he did not dismiss the Afghan officers who surrendered before him. Gradually these officers became the permanent Muslim residents of Odisha. Mughal Tamasha was inspired during the early part of the 18th century when Marathas were ruling over Odisha. Because this was the time of Hindu supremacy and people fearlessly criticized and satirized the earlier Muslim rulers who were tyrannical. Kavi Bansiballav Goswami (b. 1728) wrote a number of *Tamashas* such as *Bhil Tamasha*, *Radha - Krishna Tamasha* and *Mughal Tamasha*. Out of all these *Tamashas* only the *Mughal Tamasha* is in living tradition. Therefore, the scripts of this play could be collected and printed by Krushna Charan Behera. The other *Tamashas* have been completely lost.

An annual calendar of all these performances was maintained with great care. All these *Tamashas* taken together were known as *Chaiti Tamasha* as they were performed during the last week of the month of Chaitra (March-April). The performance

of a Tamasha is customary in front of a temple of Lord Shiva. When performance of all other *Tamashas* has been discontinued only the *Mughal Tamasha* is customarily performed by the amateur artists of the villages of Sangaat, Kuans, Shahapur and Januganj. It is said that Bansiballav wrote two different Tamashas – one *Badshahi Mughal Tamasha* and the other *Saudagari Mughal Tamasha*. But the former only survives today. The tradition of the second has been completely lost.

A highly elemental form of dramatic structure is found in *Mughal Tamasha*. As such *Mughal Tamasha* has no definite plot. Most of the characters are unrelated. They are mostly *Sebayats* of the rulers. After the performance, each of them asks for Bakshish (tips) from the Mirza, the Mughal administrator. While leaving the stage they also ask the leader of the orchestra: “What is going on here?” The leader replies that the festival of Shiva is being celebrated. Then each performer starts singing in praise of Lord Shiva and then departs.

Music played a vital role in drawing the spectators from the nearby localities in those days. Before the beginning of the play loud music is provided with Shanai, (Mohuri) Dhol and Jodi – Nagara. After the orchestral music is played a long narrative song is sung in chorus in praise of Lord Shiva. Thereafter the *Chopdar* (bodyguard) and Mirza enter one by one. The most interesting character of the play is *Dudhwali*, the milkmaid. It is played by a male actor. The Mirza – milkmaid episode arouses much fun and entertainment. To sum up, *Mughal Tamasha* is farcical, satirical and provides pure entertainment to the village people (Pattanaik, 27). The role of Lord Shiva is purely ritualistic. He is worshipped as part of religious rites. No human actor even impersonates the role of Lord Shiva. He remains at an ideological level and does not directly participate in the folk performance of *Mughal Tamasha*.

From Odisha to Bengal’s Malda district is not a long journey- even the performing art form is not greatly different in its form and technique. Gambhira festival of West Bengal was originally tenured for four days.¹ In modern times the duration varies from one day to seven days. The first day is known as ‘Ghatbhara’, the second ‘Chhoto Tamasha’, the third ‘Bado Tamasha’ and the fourth ‘Ahara’. Very interestingly, ‘Tamasha’ is part of Gambhira festival- a unique combination of religious worship and satirical features. The element of social satire is, thus, ingrained in this folk festival form. Hence, it is not very inappropriate to compare Gambhira with Mughal Tamasha of Odisha. In the nineteenth century, the word ‘Tamasha’ had many resonances. In

the context of Gambhira it meant fun, jocund mood, fun-filled festivities and caricature amongst many other meanings. In a letter to his bosom friend Gourdas the great Bengali poet Michael Madhusudan Dutt expressed his interest thus: “How do you like to see the Tamasha, if you please I can be with you at 7 in the evening” (Ghosh 19). The devotees engage in the worship of Shiva and Durga on the days of Tamasha during Gambhira festival. Little boys known as ‘Balabhakto’, invoke the folk god with chorus performances. Many other antics are performed to please the god. However, the festival on the third day of Gambhira, ‘Bado Tamasha’, has fallen into disuse now. Only the masked dance ritual exists. Here also an interesting comparison with the extinct forms of Mughal Tamasha can be of great relevance. The comic pageant along with various other caricatures can evoke memories of similar character pageants on the stage of Mughal Tamasha. The characters with weird dress code in the festival of Tamasha in Gambhira were Ghost, Witch, Sorcerer, Sorceress, Santal man and woman, Firecracker Man and many others. Even performers with the mask of Hanuman used to enact the ‘Lanka Dahan Kand’ from Ramayana on this day of the festival.

Dearth of quality research and publication in English has deprived the national and international readers from the folk cultural resources of Bengal. *Gambhira* folk dance form in Malda district of West Bengal is unique in many aspects, including the representation of Lord Shiva. In the introductory section the glory of Shiva – Parvati is sung in full steam and yet many contemporary relevant issues are introduced and discussed in great detail. The scriptwriters paid close attention to the freedom movement, ills of British rule and many other social and political evils. In fact, *Gambhira* has played the role of a great preacher. In the Invocation part, known as ‘Bandana’, there is a frequent tendency to caricature with the figure of Lord Shiva. The performers invoke Shiva as ‘Nana’ (grandfather) and start making fun with him. There is a light hearted mood of frivolity all around. After that the performers, as representatives of common people, develop a cordial relationship with Shiva and lay bare their hearts before him. They talk about their personal grievances, agonies and anxieties to the god. Shiva is considered as representative of the ruling class and he is imagined to be the savior and messiah of common masses. The environment is perpetually changed with an ambience of fun, frolic and ridicule. A homely feel pervades the stage throughout the invocation part (Roy 91).

Informal and familiar forms of address to folk gods and goddesses have been a popular practice in rural Bengal. 'Nana' or grandpa is such an address that instantly strikes an intimate bond with Shiva. It gives license to the performers to indulge in leg pulling and ridicule of the god. This god - as - next - door - neighbour image is not found in *Mughal Tamasha* of Odisha. It perfectly matches with a perennial philosophical belief of the Bengali race - "Devatare priyo kori, priyere devata" (God is made the beloved and the beloved is treated as god). In fact, this familiarizing word 'Nana' is quite popular among the performers of Muslim community in Malda and Dinajpur districts. It not only develops an informal relation with the god but also helps to create a beautiful and healthy non - communal attitude. This unique feature of *Gambhira* folk drama is not noticed in *Mughal Tamasha* or any other folk drama forms.

Situating the persona of Lord Shiva was an interesting part of the whole folk dramaturgy. He is projected as a separate character for the first time in *Gambhira* only. In the older days, Shiva was placed in the 'Mandap' as an image of a ruling deity. This was the old tradition. There was no role of Shiva as a dramatic persona. This later addition of Shiva as one of the characters has heightened the dramatic flavour to a large extent. Despite being a traditional character this role of Shiva is quite new and improved in terms of the dramatic quality of *Gambhira* performance. Even in the costume design of Lord Shiva one finds rich ingredients of conventional illusion such as 'Chamar', 'Chalanbatti', incense sticks etc.

In fact, the *Gambhira* festival and performances have also been embraced by various non - caste Hindu tribal groups - SCs and STs. They include Nagar, Dhanuk, Chnai, Rajbangshi, Keut, Goala, Jele, Tanti, Dhopa, Napit, Bind, Sadgop etc. (Ghosh, 2). Late folk researcher Haridas Palit discovered the existence of an Aryan Shiva in the Adivasi worship of *Gambhira* almost ninety years ago. In modern times, even amongst Advivasis, *Gambhira* is a kind of folk worship of Shiva who cannot be equated completely with the Shiva in Hindu pantheon. According to Haridas Palit, the first ruling deity of *Gambhira* was the Sun god. Adivasis later renamed it as *Gambhira* under the influence of Shaivism.

Contemporary events and developments poured into the composition of *Gambhira* with effortless ease. Poets could take liberty with the depiction of Shiva as an arouser of comic laughter. Muslim *Gambhira* scriptwriter Mohammed Sufi introduced the character of Shiva in an innovative way:

He dakh, ho dakh kore dakte

Keda elo bhaire –

Ini ki Sir Ashutosh? High courter judge

Gaye mathay kano Chhaire? (Ghosh, 101)

[Look whom we called and who turned up? Is it Sir Ashutosh? Judge of High Court? Then why is his body smeared with ashes?]

The comic portrayal of Shiva became so popular that in all subsequent performances Shiva became a regular presence on stage in this costume. Then he is not Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee, the Vice – chancellor of Calcutta University, but the initiator of all developmental activities – later even representative of the government. In the *Gambhira* productions of Sufi Master Shiva is now a representative of the feudal order. This symbolic role of Shiva in *Gambhira* is a unique feature indeed. Other characters of *Gambhira* are the poverty – stricken masses of Bengal – ill-clad, ill-fed, shabby and miserable. In the court of Lord Shiva, the poor commoners air their grievances. After their presentation the god provides assurance of grievance-redressal and disappears. The common people continue the plaintive murmur on various burning issues – languages problem, ills of English education, political lobbyism and many other national and international political turmoil. Ashutosh Bhattacharya observes that the poor commoners even chastise Shiva for their abject poverty and sufferings (Bhattacharya 243). They chide the idle god for his inaction – a god drugged in ‘Bhang’ and ‘Dhutra’. In some presentations Shiva himself is a diseased figure – an old man with protruded paunch due to malaria.

Notwithstanding the weird caricatures and comic interludes with Shiva, there was a genuine bonhomie with this god next door- accessible, down-to-earth and magnanimous. Hence, the performers are reluctant to let this grand old man go because he has the power to solve all their problems. It becomes an integral part of folk belief. In the *Gambhira* productions of Shameer Khalifa, Shiva is summoned to resolve the communal conflict in the backdrop of an event in Malda where a scuffle broke out between Hindus and Muslims over an overlapping of two processions of *Gambhira* and *Tajia* during Muharram. Even the poet surrenders to Shiva as prices of essential commodities go up in an unprecedented manner. (Ghosh 111).

While rounding off the survey of this popular folk art form it will be essential to talk about the form of *Gambhira* in Bangladesh, the East Pakistan of yore. There is no character named Shiva. Instead, one finds the word 'Nana' which is Hindi in origin, but quite prevalent there as a Mussalmani word. The Muslim *Gambhira* poets address a very old man as 'Nana' keeping in mind the memory of Shiva in *Gambhira*. 'Nana' in Malda is Shiva but in Bangladesh he is a veteran ploughman or a village head. We find imaginary conversation between this 'Nana' (grandfather) and 'Lateen' (grandson) on various local and global issues. This folk drama is staged here in the form of a duet. The secular look of the grandfather-grandson duet is a highly modified version of the original religious worship of Shiva. In Malda Mohammed Kutubul Alam and Mohammed Rakibuddin are the best performing pair in the role of 'Nana' and 'Nati'. Another very interesting addition to this folk performance tradition is the rise of a team of female *Gambhira* performers in Mahadipur area of modern Bangladesh. In the production of this group one discovers the characters of 'Nani' (grandmother) and 'Natni' (granddaughter) instead of 'nana' (grandfather) and 'nati' (grandson). It is quite absorbing to note the change in gender to suit the presentation of female *Gambhira* performers. Special mention should be made of Rahela Khatun of Rajarampur and 'Chitra' of Char Pratap in this connection.

Conclusion

West has traditionally been an ardent admirer of Indian performing arts. If we take a look at the reception of Indian dramatic forms in the West, we discover a paradigm shift in the acceptance of Indian performing art forms. Barba specifically studied Kathakali in order to report back to Grotowski, who incorporated, adapted and then abandoned some of the techniques. Barba has also regularly invited Sanjukhta Panigrahi to work with his company in their search for performative presence, 'bios' or the 'extra – daily body' in performance (Yarrow 204). Increasing exposure to workshops and performances by practitioners from other cultures has resulted in a more eclectic training programme for Western performers, which has at least in part produced more flexible performers (Yarrow 205-6). Of course this is not always the case; the superficial acquisition of a few 'bolt – on' techniques does not in itself produce a radical shift, and it certainly flirts with charges of piracy or consumerist packaging. But there are many companies and performers. . . whose meeting with different styles has been more thorough and prolonged, and who have taken some

care to familiarize themselves with the bases of those styles. Indeed in several instances trainers and directors of Indian origin, resident in western countries or regular visitors as workshop – leaders or directors are the providers. Jatinder Verma directs Tara Arts, which works with British performers of Asian descent. Yarrow further observes that there are many other similar dance and theatre ventures in the UK, like *Tamasha* Theatre and Shobana Jeyasingh’s dance work, which provide a slightly different slant on the notion of cultural transfer. Unfortunately, *Mughal Tamasha* of Odisha has not enjoyed this international attention. It speaks volumes of its endangered status. Same is true of *Gambhira* performance in Malda district of West Bengal. A very popular form in this district but unable to draw global attention to the unique features of this folk performance. This is a major area of common concern that we need to address in future with all seriousness.

Notes

1. The author is greatly indebted to Pradyot Ghosh, Pushpajit Roy and other serious scholars on the Gambhira folk art form in Malda district of West Bengal. Their field research is an excellent guide to any aspiring researcher.

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