




## **GAMBHIRA, GAJAN AND CHARAK: CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS OF MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES IN MALDA DISTRICT**

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### **RESEARCH ARTICLE**



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#### **Abstract**

This paper attempts to show the traditional cultural forms of the Malda district, which is considered a gateway of North Bengal and is also renowned for its rich cultural heritage. On Charitra Sankranti, people celebrate folk festivals like Gambhira, Gajan, and Charak with great devotion, enthusiasm, and pleasure. These festivals also connect communities whose livelihoods rely on agriculture. These groups are referred to as marginal groups, who are forced to the periphery of a society where they are denied access to resources, opportunities, and status. These festivals are widely observed by the Malo, Dhanuk, and Chain communities in the Malda district. Through these folk forms, these groups express their passionate devotion to “Lord Shiva,” revered as “Nilkantha.” These cultural practices are also emblems of ritual austerities and practices that are performed by the sect of people who normally belong to a lower class of society. Employing Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s concept of the subaltern, the study to investigate how these folk forms serve as an alternative medium of representation for voices historically marginalized from institutional and textual discourse. Through textual analysis and field investigation, this study examines the historical and cultural significance of Gambhira, Gajan, and Charak, emphasizing their connections to the lowest echelons of society.

**Keywords:** *Cultural heritage, Marginalized Communities, Gambhira, Gajan, Charak*

### **Introduction**

Themes of resistance and the quest for identity are products of marginality, where persecution and suppression breed creativity. Perhaps the first critics to decenter the center and bring the margin into the center itself were the German philosophers Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida. The latter also discussed how binaries impact our daily lives. Because the idea of center and margin is, in reality, relative and dependent on power dynamics and hegemony, it is reasonable to argue that there has always been, and will continue to be, both. The topic of marginality was undoubtedly brought to light by the work of Althusser, Gramsci, Fanon, Foucault, Edward Said, and Ngugi (Randhawa 153). Social and historical hierarchical positions can be understood from the different social categories like “elite,” “people,” and “subaltern.” The dominant groups from the administrative and socio-political levels whose power shaped them to allow control over everything are termed as “elite,” and on the other side, the working and laborer classes who are not allowed to participate in the power-controlling process are termed as “marginalized” or “subaltern” (Spivak 44). Malda district is known as North Bengal’s entrance. In the past, Malda served as the capital of Gour-Banga and experienced three distinct eras of supremacy. It was formerly the capital of Gour-Banga, which witnessed three separate periods of the Buddhist Palas, Hindu Senas, and Muslim Nawabs dynasties’ splendor in ancient Bengal (“Malda District”). People from scheduled castes, minor communities, refugees, and members of various backward classes make up the demographic representation of the Malda population (“Malda District”). Consequently, the region disseminates the narrative of injustice, exploitation, discrimination, and deprivation. Malda district is regarded as a prominent hub of folk cultures, including Baul Gajan, Neel Charak, Domni, Alkap Gan Naam, Sankirtan, Jatra Pala Gan, Kabi Gan, Gambhira Gan, and Pancharas. Practitioners of these folk forms are mostly ordinary individuals engaged in modest enterprises, with just a limited number holding government positions. They assert that these folk forms can express their emotions, including dread, grief, and violence. They exhibit profound regard for their traditional culture. The study aims to explore how these festivals reveal marginalized voices in the landscape of Malda district and the cultural significance of the ritualistic performances.

### **Objectives**

The main objective of this study is

1. to explore the chronicle and examine the ritual framework and symbolic significance of the Gambhira, Gajan, and Charak celebrations in Malda.

2. to study how marginalized communities participate, form, and transmit these folk traditions.
3. to investigate how these cultural practices serve as tools for social critique, solidarity, and self-actualization.

### **Overview of renowned works relevant for the purpose of study**

The scholarly investigation of folk traditions in North Bengal and adjacent regions, particularly in Malda, has primarily focused on Gambhira, Gajan, and Charak through ethnographic documentation, historical reconstruction, and theological study. Foundational texts, such as Haridas Palit's *Adyer Gambhira* and Benoy Kumar Sarkar's *The Folk Elements of Hindu Culture*, elucidate the ritualistic and sociocultural dimensions of these practices, situating them within the broader framework of village deity worship and fertility cults in eastern India. These studies emphasize the ceremonial behaviors linked to the worship of Shiva, recognized as an agrarian deity. Subsequent regional scholarship, including Radha Gobinda Ghosh's *Maldaher Lok Samskriti* and Sachikanta Das's *Gambhirar Otit O Bartaman*, enriches this documentation by articulating the socio-cultural milieu of Malda and tracing the historical transformation of Gambhira from a temple-oriented ritual to a performative form of popular expression. Monojit Adhikary's *Gajon* is relevant for regional field-based analysis of Gajan and Charak. While these works offer substantial descriptive insight, they frequently emphasize cultural preservation over a critical analysis of the power dynamics intrinsic to performance. Recent studies have begun to analyze Gambhira and its related traditions through the lens of performance theory. Chakraborty (2020) describes Gambhira as a vibrant dramatic form shaped by embodiment, humor, and audience participation, highlighting the importance of performativity in the construction of social meaning. Dey (2012) examines the evolving landscape of Bengali folk forms in the context of globalization and its sociological implications. Concurrently, subaltern and cultural studies scholars, notably Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, provide a theoretical framework for examining vernacular cultural forms as manifestations of historically marginalized communities. Although their research does not explicitly focus on Gambhira, Gajan, or Charak, their paradigm of subaltern agency and voice offers a significant lens for reassessing these festivals as sites of resistance, negotiation, and symbolic inversion. Despite the growing body of literature, a significant gap remains in scholarly research that integrates localized ethnographic observations from the Malda district with comparative literary and theoretical analysis. Current scholarship frequently perceives Gambhira, Gajan, and Charak as separate cultural phenomena, overlooking their interrelated function in expressing collective identity and socio-political awareness among agrarian and caste-marginalized communities. This study addresses the deficiency by incorporating subaltern perspectives to conceptualize these festivals as vernacular narratives that connect sacred tradition with quotidian social realities. The study aims to examine Gambhira, Gajan, and Charak in Malda district as prominent folk festivals which provide a comprehensive understanding of the cultural history of marginalized populations of that district.

### **Methodology**

The study employed a qualitative methodology to examine community participation in festivals like Gambhira, Gajan, and Charak. Semi structured interviews with participants from diverse locales in the English Bazar, Old Malda, and Habibpur blocks, coupled with observations of festival performances in these regions and telephonic discussions with folk festival organizers, enabled the researcher to develop a precise research framework. The data collection approach includes interviews and textual analysis of relevant sources such as textbooks, journals, and local tales, as well as the incorporation of diverse archival materials as a core element of the literary research methodology. Ethical measures, such as informed consent and institutional permissions, were adhered to, with researcher reflexivity recorded through field notes to address positionality and possible biases.

### **Gambhira Gan is a folk tradition that involves social satirical commentary**

Gambhira Gan, a type of folk song popular in the northwest region of Bangladesh. The songs are assumed to have originated from the worship of Lord Shiva, God of all Gods, addressed as "nana" in Gambhira and associated with agriculture, also known as "gambhir." To define the literal meaning must be mentioned Aadyer Gambhira by Hari das Palit. In antiquity, the structure resembling Chandi Mandap was referred to as "gambhiri" or "gambhira" (Sarkar 68). During the era of the second Dharmapal and Gobinda Chandra, structures in provinces such as Gour, Rangpur, and Dinajpur were referred to as gambhira, signifying a 'house of God' where religious activities were conducted (Sarkar 69). The Gajan Utsav of the Rarh region has transformed into Addyer Gambhira in the Malda district (Sarkar 73). Recently it is known as Gambhira. It is a chorus song sung by a group of singers with humorous dialogues spoken in regional languages. The language of Gambhira is straightforward and full of slang terms to increase its appeal to a wider audience while still being captivating and captivating enough to grab listeners' attention. It retains the flavor of the regional language and culture. The language's patriarchal nature is shown by sociolinguistic analysis, which also reveals that the majority of its discourse revolves around the stereotype of a backward, oppressed class struggling for equality (Chakraborty 49). The content of this regional folk form is to contextualize the prevalent sociopolitical issues through gesture, posture, and amusing dialogues. As a case study of the area, Gambhira highlights the district's intricate relationship to partition. The primary cause of the region's impoverished state can be found in performances in the form of dance and songs composed in regional dialects. The performers are addressed as "nana" and "nati". "Nati" (grandson) wears a ragged jersey and has a gamchha that is drawn round his waist and a pair of bellas around his ankles. The grizzly-bearded grandfather (nana), who is the supremo, wears tiger skin around his waist and beads of rudraksha. The main objective of this specific theatrical form is to make the ignorant masses aware of the socio-political condition of the world and country as well (Chakraborty 47). This folk form of the underprivileged demonstrates their fight against the elite class of society. They attempt to illustrate their social hardship through their attire and witty dialogues.

### **Gajan is a festival of inviting freshness and vitality, forgetting the old sorrows and sufferings of the common people**

The Gajan festival was once a significant social leveler and still is to some degree. The Rarh Gajan takes the form of Gambhira in the Malda district (Sarkar 73). All of the people that participated in the contest became Shiva devotees and are held in high regard. In the past, the landlord honored the peasants who engaged in penances that involved hanging themselves from sharp hooks on wooden houses or piercing their tongues with sharp needles. As consultants of Lord Shiva, these purported “low caste” individuals would elevate themselves at Gajan. The devotees celebrate the marriages of the male deities Siva, Nil, or Dharmaraj with their respective partners at the Gajan festival. It signifies the union of the sun and earth’s forces. The spectacle occurs over three days, commencing prior to Chaitra Sankranti and concluding the following day; however, it persists until the onset of the month of Asharr, also known as Ashad, which heralds the arrival of the rainy season characterized by rejuvenation and vigor (Gupta). The major objective of this folk form is to express fervent devotion to local deities and to solicit favors for fertility, bountiful harvests, and protection from disasters. People associated with the festival believe that the ritualistic enactments will grant them a prosperous life, eliminating whatever sadness and suffering was experienced in the preceding year. Mendicants, or those who rely on charity or beg, are the main organizers of the Gajan Gathering competition. They are referred to as “Gajan Sanyasis”. Gathering is primarily held on the grounds of unique Shiva places. Instead of being held in a person’s home, the pageant is held on public property. The Scheduled Caste of Bengali people typically dominates the competition in the area. In some parts of Malda district these ritualistic activities are conducted by the Malo communities, who are by profession known as fishermen. The Namasudra, Rajbangshi, and other economically disadvantaged communities also participate in the observance of these ceremonial rituals (Adhikary 203). Charak is celebrated on the next day of Gajan, followed by “Adhivas” and “Neel Shashiti.” People develop into cosmetic versions of Shiva, Parvati, Krishna, and other deities to entertain the audiences of different areas. Representatives from the Rajbangshi, Malo, and Dhanuk communities are typically permitted to engage in such activities, known as “Song Saja” (put on disguise). They endeavor to entertain the public through acting and singing. Regionally, these songs are designated as “Song of Gajan” (song in a Bengali cultural context). The hearts of the common populace generate gajan-gaan (Gajan songs), which represent their social, religious, and political standing, illustrating the history of social stratification, class strife, and the exploitation of the impoverished by the political elite and ruling class. In general, Gajan works with two groups of oppressed people: the Namasudras (untouchables) and women. This event empowers the subaltern masses to challenge the caste system, hierarchy, and all other classifications, such as class, gender, dialect, and so on. Additionally, it evokes a range of feminine feelings in men, including “anti-penis envy,” such as dread, hunger, thirst, and fury. The word “garjan,” which means “clamor produced by sannyasis during the celebrations,” is the source of the Bengali word “gajan.” The word seems to have been derived from the Sanskrit word “Garjana,” meaning a loud clamor (Sarkar 73). The term “garjan,” which means “roar,” is produced by sannyasis during the celebrations. Another explanation claims that it comes from the words “Ga” (village) and “Jan” (people). Shiva Gajan is thought to be a celebration of Lord Shiva and Mata Parvati’s sacred marriage day. Bengalis celebrate “Neel Puja” on April 13 with enormous joy. This puja was usually performed by married women who keep fasting at some point throughout the day and worship the phallic emblem of Lord Shiva with milk, honey, and bael leaves to please the Lord and obtain his blessings for the welfare of their family members. The most often accepted explanation is that Gajan is the celebration of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati’s nuptials. In this context, we use the name Neel, supposedly derived from one of Shiva’s titles, “NeelKantha” (one with a blue throat). The ritualistic name of this festival is “Neelavathi vrat” or “Neel Shasti” (Gupta). In Hindu mythology, the deadly poison “Halahal” used to be the first element to emerge from the Devatas (gods) and Asuras (demons) who were churning it to obtain “Amrita.” The poison should have wiped out all life due to its toxicity. Lord Shiva, however, came to their aid and ingested the poison. Though he kept it in his throat, he did not digest it. Consequently, the throat turned blue, which is why Shiva arrived here to be identified as Neel Kantha. In addition, Maha Shivaratri is observed on this day (Gupta).

### **Charak is one of the means of attaining God’s grace through austere practices**

Charak Puja is a crucial aspect of the Gajan Festival. Derived from the term “Chakra” or “Charaka,” meaning “a circle,” the word “Charak” indicates swinging or circular motion. “Charak” signifies the cyclic order of birth and death in human life (Palit 188). In some parts of the Malda district, Charak is celebrated twice in a year. The second form of Charak is known as “Ulta Charak,” normally celebrated in the month of Baisakh. The worshipping of the Charak tree and the performance of diverse austere practices by “Charak Sanyasis” are fundamental to the Charak Puja tradition. They belong to non-Brahmin communities. Each year, on April 14th, this performance is executed through certain austere practices like “Kanta bhanga” and “Vanfonda.” Several Vanas are said to be in use in the festival. They are known as the Kapala Vana, the Trishula or Agni, and the Jhiva or Sarpa Vana (Sarkar, 103). The term “Vanfoda” evokes the narrative of Vana, who attained legendary status in the Dharma Samhita. The Vana captivated Lord Shiva with his frenzied dance, piercing his flesh to obtain blessings from Him. Lower-class communities adhere to the same traditions to seek the favor of Lord Shiva while also demonstrating their resistance and tenacity through these austere practices (Sarkar 107). The event is observed by venerating the Charak tree, regarded as a symbol of Shiva, while the soil in which it is embedded is culturally recognized as Mata Parvati. The Charak tree consists solely of a trunk, devoid of branches or roots. The height varies from thirty to forty feet. The trunk seeks rectitude. Following its veneration by priests, the tree is placed in a pit and supported with bamboo. Thereafter, the Sanyasis engage in their ascetic practices. The tree is expected to return to the same river ghat in subsequent years after being sufficiently submerged in water. The Charak Sanyasis subsequently return it to the community space, designated as a playground, which serves as the puja ground (place for worship). An idol or mask is attached to the top of a tree and thereafter raised directly onto the ground for worship. Participants engaged

in the ceremonies to enhance their significance. In specific locations, the mask is additionally known as Harakali. The essential notion is that of Ardhanarishvara, representing the deity's Purush (Man) and Prakriti (Nature). A further interpretation is that human and natural lifestyles coexist together. The most notable characteristic is the ability of sanyasi priests to pierce the bodies of participating sannyasis with sharp hooks while minimizing the chance of injury. The monks' act of piercing human flesh with sharp implements without drawing blood appears to be a spiritual phenomenon. They have the proficiency to maneuver these sharp hooks without injuring the veins and inflicting minimal discomfort, according to years of experience. The Vanfoda festival is the informal name for this event. Subsequently, employing the ropes attached to the hook at one end and the Charak Tree at the other, the men suspended by the hook moved in a circular manner. Individuals sometimes fall from considerable heights after prolonged circular motion; nevertheless, astonishingly, no one seems to incur severe damage. They stubbornly remain immobile, as if spellbound. Certain persons, while elevated on the shoulders of fellow devotees, pierce their tongues with needles and circumambulate the Charak tree. In some communities, thrilling events occur when participants recline on a nail-studded plank and scale a bamboo platform situated above a bed of thorns, and in various locales, arrows are embedded into the body with their ends encased in charred cotton. Devotees do dances using human skulls in several locations. This discipline pertains to tantra, or the dark arts. Communities participated in these actions to demonstrate their authentic devotion to Lord Shiva. They endeavor to discover the route to salvation. Such activities are regarded as an authentic role reversal for men seeking to understand the challenges faced by women, particularly delivery. Subsequently, the men attached to the hook rose in a circular manner, employing the ropes linked to the hook on one end and the Charak Tree on the other. Remarkably, no individuals seemed to sustain major injuries despite several falling from a substantial height during repeated circular motion. They seem to be in a daze and are unwilling to disembark. While elevated on the shoulders of fellow devotees, some individuals pierce their tongues with needles and circumambulate the Charak tree. An in-depth analysis of tongue piercing Prominent mothers empower followers to include their children, with the objective of enhancing the infants' wellness. Other distressing rituals occur within specific communities, such as adherents reclining on a plank embedded with nails, ascending a bamboo platform situated on a mattress of thorns, or experiencing arrows penetrating their bodies with the tips encased in charred cotton. Sanyasis play a crucial part in the observance of these austere ritualistic practices; yet, they also function as a notable socioeconomic equalizer to a certain degree. All revere and regard participants in the event as embodiments of a divine being. Historically, the landlord praised the peasants who performed penances, which entailed piercing their lips with sharp needles to suspend themselves from hooks attached to wooden buildings. These alleged members of the "low caste" would surpass their rank and be recognized as emissaries of Lord Shiva, designated as "Devadidev Mahadev."

### **Discussion**

The folk festivals Gambhira, Gajan, and Charak serve as religious rites and potent vehicles for articulating the cultural viewpoints of marginalized communities, who examine their identity, power, and social relationships through their performances. The performances, emphasizing physical endurance through strenuous workouts, comic endeavors, and unconventional techniques, provide marginalized individuals a platform to express their resistance and share their unique stories, often overlooked in popular literature and history. These festivals are significant now as they exhibit the enduring traditions of Malda district, foster community cohesion, preserve narratives of resistance, and safeguard cultural identity amidst challenges posed by the digital realm.

### **Conclusion**

Overall observation of those festivals associated with the popular culture of Malda district represents not only the religious aspect but also the joy and sorrow of the people who have to endure mistreatment, financial hardships, social marginalization, and humiliation. These people also believe that these festivals are the medium of carrying prosperity by eliminating sorrows and suffering of the previous year. It is known from the ancient scriptures that one can attain the blessings of God only through austere ascetic practices. These are not merely the popular cultural forms of Malda, but dynamic cultural expressions that help oppressed groups in the Malda district proclaim their identity, fight social injustices, and keep their culture alive. Even when modernity, migration, and changing institutional interests make things harder, these traditions nonetheless give people a way to speak out and stay strong within the periphery of power dynamics.

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