



The Indigenous Folk Culture and Traditions of Gajan Festival: Theory and Practices

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ABSTRACT

Folk traditions are those which describe about the activities of daily lives of the masses, their lifestyle and their ritual practices and religious and cultural traditions. The descriptive nature of the folk culture makes it complex to comprehend, even though it looks simple. Folk life comprises of different types of social relationships, cultural symbolism and all these together impact on ritual cycle, cosmological ideas and mythological belief system of a popular culture. Folk culture and tradition being an important part of day to day activities of the common masses, is an all encompassing process. The origin of the folk traditions has neither been historicized authentically and nor attracted such intellectual supervision, but continued to be accepted as a popular practice and festival of the masses. It is generally argued that Folk traditions have a processual nature of the embodiment in the festivals and the different dimensions of festivities through ritual performances. Indeed it is a genuine fact that folk culture is being practiced by the masses who generally belong to 'antaja sampradaya' (lower strata of the social hierarchy). The gods and goddesses of the folk traditions are being regarded as "lok devtas" and "lok devis". In Bengal we have varieties of trends and phases regarding the folk traditions the "Devi-palas", "Dev-palas", "Bibi-palas" and "Pir palas". The famous folk performances practiced in Bengal are basically "Palagaan", "Yatrapalas", "Sangkritan", "Hariyatra", and "Tarja". This paper will particularly



explore the philosophy of inclusiveness and equity that we always understood through the modes of different festivities in India. It will also cover mandatory areas of the indigenous knowledge that ultimately proves the holistic nature of “Indian Knowledge System”.

INTRODUCTION

Folk culture is being regarded as the vernacular traditions also. The worlds of Sanskrit and Vernacular traditions both of these simultaneously shaped the Bengali medieval Tantric religious practices. The vernacular traditions with their practices provide a glimpse of the regional traditions focusing on its particular geographical landscape. The concept of the Little Traditions and Great Traditions always flourished and continued to be in practice by the masses hand in hand and created a constructive connectivity with each other. The disciplines of Folk Culture and Folk Hinduism always provide an analytical framework in the study of Hinduism even today. In the words of Max Weber Folk religion is being understood as “popular religion”, “religion of the masses”, “faith of the folk”, “mass religion”, etc. The following are some of Max Weber’s, little discussed reflections on the ‘popular religion’ those are:- a) ‘Popular religion’ is that religion, which is practiced by the groups, who are non-privileged in social and economic strata, b) ‘Popular religion’ is constituted by specific types of practices and beliefs (i.e. magic, worshipping natural forces, etc.). (Sarsar, 2011) According to M.N. Srinivas Sanskritization is a process through which an ‘underprivileged’ Hindu caste or a tribe or other group, changed its beliefs, practices, traditions, customs and the way of life, on the patterns as set by the privileged castes or groups. Anthropologist Nirmal Kumar Bose’s theory of ‘Hindu Method of Tribal Absorption’ can be a good example on this particular issue.

HISTORY AND BELIEF

A festival like Gajan, is a community festival which is celebrated during the last month of the Bengali calendar Chaitra (mid-March to mid-April), centers on the holy marriage of Shiva and Parvati, the deities of the rural folk pantheon. The word “gajan” refers to “the village people” where “ga” means “gram” (village) and “jan” means “janagan” (people). The participants, known as bhaktas or sanyasis, go through strict discipline for a month and that is the month of Chaitra. (Dutta, 2021) According to the representation in the religious scriptures it is believed that Ramai Pandit’s Sunya Purana first referred to the festival of hook swinging while describing the creation of the world. On the other hand Dharma Mangal Kavya (17th-18th Century) of Ghanaram and Anadi Mangal of Ramdas Adak refer to different



myths behind the origin of the festival. Haraprasad Shastri, one among the eminent Bengali sanskritist and educator, in his writings titled Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal (1894), refers to the Buddhist origin of the Gajan ritual. According to him the festival of Gajan is just a glimpse of the left overs of the decaying Buddhism in Bengal. Shashi Bhusan Dasgupta, he introduced about the origin of a deity in his book Obscure Religious Cult (1995), which describes the admixture of the primitive practices as the origin of the cults and rituals. The Gajan festival is observed over the rural parts of West Bengal and in Bangladesh mostly among the inhabitants of Jessore, Khulna, Bakherganj, Faridpur, Barisal, etc. This festival finds its' relevance and practiced mostly among caste groups of Namasudras, Sutradhars, Balas, Poundras, Sadgope, Goalas, Telis, Kaibarttas, Doms, Napit, Kamar, Bagdi etc. basically who are termed as underprivileged. Lord Shiva and Dharmaraja are the focused deities of Gajan. In Bengal we celebrate Gajan in two forms one is Shiber Gajan and the other is Dharma Gajan which is being dedicated to Dharma Thakur.

Dharma Mangal Kavya is a long narrative, Bengali religious poem which declares the worship of Lord Dharma as the eternal, formless and the supreme God. According to David Curley in his writing Battle and Self-Sacrifice in a Bengali Warrior's Epic: Lausen's Quest to be a Raja in Dharma Mangal, Chapter Six of Rites of Spring by Ralph Nicholas he discusses that of a pre-colonial warriors' culture in Bengal. Dharma Mangal texts describe the career of a hero and a raja and their narratives seems to describe the nature of warrior culture in Bengal, and to contain it through the practice of "self-sacrifice" in both battle and "truth ordeals." The texts proves the evidence of "Sanskritization" of Dharma's Gajan. The Sanskritization is very much evident from the narrative of a warrior's model rather than the use of peasant's model. Moreover the text emphasizes the assimilation of Lord Dharma to Vishnu rather than Shiva, and the worshipper of Lord Dharma, Lausen is portrayed as similar to the divine king Lord Rama. It is also believed that the Indian society is quite dynamic in nature despite of the practice of hierarchical order. (Curley, 2008) M.N. Srinivas, first represented through his 'Sanskritization Theory' that the structure of Hindu society was not at all static but rather it always possessed a dynamic character and it was followed through the process of Sanskritization. Hitesh Ranjan Sanyal showed how social mobility was acquired among the underprivileged castes by changing their occupations and thus gaining a different status in the society. Ghanashyam Shah suggested that the ethnic reform in India had two dimensions, one is 'reformative' and the other is 'alternative'. (Biswas, 2015)

The cults of Dharma Gajan and Siva Gajan appear to be celebrated simultaneously, with Dharma cult dominating the regions of Rarh and Barddhaman and Siva Gajan in the districts of South 24 Parganas and North 24 Parganas. Gajan is observed because it is believed by the masses that it brings back fertility and



the process of regeneration gets sanctified by the grace of the local deities. The soil is being worshipped for good harvests over the year and it is also connected to the worship of Mother Earth and combines the worship of the female energies with it. The holy marriage between Shiva and Parvati symbolizes the union between Purusha and Prakriti which is also the origin of creation and it contributes to the possibilities of regeneration. This notion about the regeneration is correlated on the one hand with the human fertility and on the other with agrarian fertility cult. At the same time the fertile nature of the feminine body is worshipped and the earth as the Goddess is also being worshipped. The popular belief is to show reverence towards Matri Sakti and the sacred union between Shiva and Parvati is a power to keep the community balanced socially, ecologically and also keeps it healthy. The bhaktas and the sanyasis acts as the people representing the bridegroom's side during the marriage ritual through dancing and enacting spectacular feats. This scenario suggests the process of domestication of the deities rather than securing a divine distance through the practice of austerity which is being portrayed through the other rituals of this particular festival. It is more of an union of human with the divine where we domesticate a revered deity as one among us. It is very important to notify that the role of the temple priest is very minimal in the religious ceremonies of Gajan. This festival basically examines the different ways in which human body can be represented, regulated, submitted, sacrificed, sanctified and transformed to showcase the dynamism of the folklore centered religious practice in the lands of Bengal. Because most of the rituals of Gajan festival portrays "self-sacrifice", which gives the folk culture a different processual identity and it brings out the relation between 'folk' and 'lore'; between identity formation and representation of the local masses. Although we can visualize the method of a entire community's social identity formation depends on the traditions and practices those are being followed and observed by its' masses. Gajan is a religious code of conduct which showcases that the offerings to the deities can also be made with acts of penance, religious discipline and self-mortification which also imparts a multi-cultural aspect to it. The whipping of bodies we can relate it to the practices of Muharram, self-mortification is seen in the Jain rituals, Christian traditions represents scourging, strict austerities have always been an integral part of Hindu rituals and many more cults of the tribal religion give testimonies to this. (Dutta, 'Performing Community': Organisation of deity and socio-cultural stratification in the hook swinging (Gajan) festival, 2025)

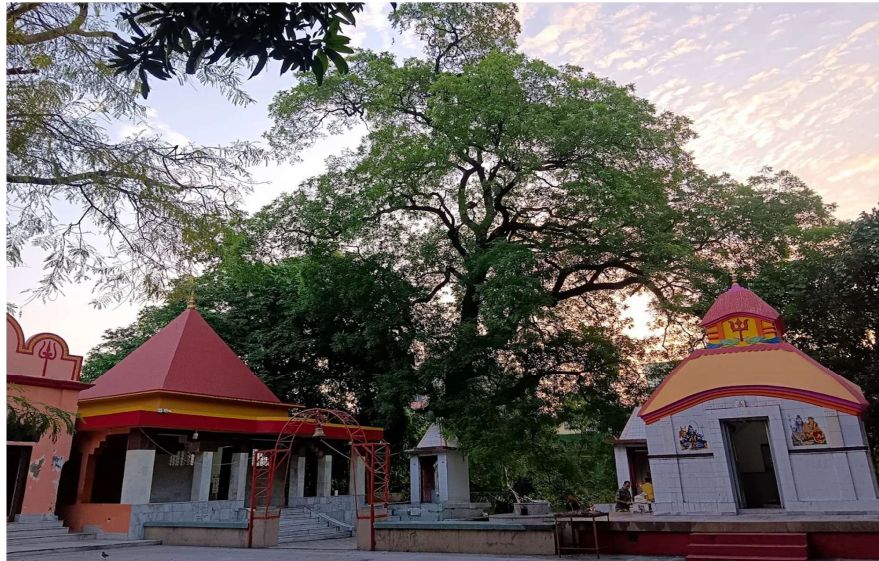


FIGURE:-1 The Gorakhsnath temple complex of Arjunpur, Charigram where the rituals of Gajan are being performed.

SOURCE:-https://lh3.googleusercontent.com/gps-cs-s/APNQkAHfHAqZmKqABQaj_oL1af3fw2qpYQ-xDv0EKxWLTnBO2UT4KsTV6BnYZGeOoAyI5qOE7nEHBPTiCGP66xLU0RukoQ77VTte-vAjgeAUygvstTn5fIAOSH4C5C6OaTqq5i8BLekV5hzDJ=s1360-w1360-h1020-rw



FIGURE:-2 The Gajan Sannyasis gathering at the temple complex of Charigram for the ritual of Baanphora.

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RITUALS: THEORY AND PRACTICES

The Gajan festival implements the idea of normalizing and socializing body in a prescribed setting, where the Gajan Sanyasis represents their bodies as a target of ‘punishment’. The festival has three distinct aspects: the ritualistic transformation of the devotees, the performances of different rites and involvements of the masses from various stratas of society either being a visitor or audience or a devotee or a practitioner of the popular cult. The Gajan festival begins with the initiation ritual which is conducted by the Mool Sanyasi who make the other Sanyasis or bhaktas wear the sacred thread(poita) around their neck or body with the enchantments of divine mantras. The ritual of initiation is called “Utti Dan” According to Monojit Adhikari quotes the mantra, “Attyo gotro poritejjyo, Shiv gotro probesito” (Renouncing own clan, entering Shiva’s clan). After the initiation rituals all the Gajan Sannyasis start observing the month or the days of self-sacrifice and austerity like they cannot sleep on bed, they cannot eat food made of spice and oil, they have to make their living on collecting alms from the houses of the villages. They have to take bath from the sacred pond which is adjacent to the nearby Shiva temple: they must take their meal once a day. They cannot gulp their own saliva or wear anything apart from dhoti and gamcha (loincloth). Gajan is divided into two parts according to day and night, one is called the Din Gajan and the other one is called the Raat Gajan. The enactments of the ritual practices are being performed on the main temple premises. The Garbhagriha or sanctum sanctorum becomes a cultural space where the devotees undergo the process of initiation which is being conducted in the presence of Mool sannyasi or the Pat Bhakta. The Mul Sannyasi generally initiates all the important rituals of the festival in collaboration with the local priest. (Dutta, Creating Pantheon. Performances, and Beliefs: A Visual Narrative of Gajan in Bengal , 2023)

At the initial phase of the festival the devotees visit the homes among different communities belonging to the non-privileged caste groups like from a Dom household they collect bamboo from their garden which is being specified as sacred and it is used during the enactments of rituals. They go to a household of a potter and bring mud which is the most significant element. Then they visit the home of local peasants and fruit sellers and collect fruits which gets offered to the deities during rituals. They also visit the households of “Bala” caste and collect iron rods and knives which are being used during the rituals of self-sacrifice. Along with these the devotees will go to the village side to collect the brunch of a tree called “gamar”, a native Indian beech wood used for making boats and musical instruments and such woods are being used by the “Sutradhar” community to make wooden handicrafts.



FIGURE:-3 The Initiation ritual(utti daan) of the Gajan Sannyasis takes place on the first day of the festival in the main temple complex.

SOURCE:-<https://lh3.googleusercontent.com/gps-cs-s/APNQkAFXhdV37aoehSSnH1wkOPFFj7Ek8Hmdlr0OIECVlefDuxlvbOpN7FjRwiA5St95uMk90itaOaTbMoW3B7G6swQZjaG0uHyTkuLYW3JgUEpQ80wxgExysb-hPSYLZLk9Z6Tlwmt0g=s1360-w1360-h1020-rw>

For centuries this branch of beech wood is considered holy and being worshipped during the ritual of Pat puja. Somewhere it is also kept dipped in the religious pond for years and it doesn't get destroyed by water of the pond. They believe that by the grace of Lord Shiva it all happens. The devotees, in due interval, chants the name of God: Mahadev er charane seva lage, Baba Mahadev (We devote ourselves in the service of Lord Shiva, everything happens by his grace). On the second day the Raat Gajan begins, the Pat Bhaktas and Kamini bhaktas perform Neel Puja or Neel Shasti. The Raat Gajan also involves the rituals of ban phora, barsi phora where iron rods are being pierced through the body of the Gajan Sannyasis and they also performs the Hindola or the fire plays, The whole process of enactments symbolizes self-sacrifice and it is believed that the whole process creates a connectivity of humans and the divine. The last day of Gajan is the most interesting one, the Charak ghora is being followed by Pat puja. The devotees are suspended to wooden log that is being worshipped first, which is the Pat Puja.



FIGURE:-4 There is a ritual of worshipping the iron rods before the body piercing takes place. It is an act to respect all the underprivileged group of people who are associated with the livelihood like for an example making of iron rods and knives.

SOURCE:-[https://lh3.googleusercontent.com/gps-cs-s/APNQkAGthdIPg67-](https://lh3.googleusercontent.com/gps-cs-s/APNQkAGthdIPg67-vwa8RfQbEA_H33k7H4C2kM8g4dZ4DWCElyp_YgeGhTMHla0Ug0xSPeiZd8z5rypTtwyg3q_tMGXlq3fbKp3fG0Lp4XqUQ0RFmliTQJOpNb98NCF0TIHGEjJw37gc=s1360-w1360h1020-rw)

[vwa8RfQbEA_H33k7H4C2kM8g4dZ4DWCElyp_YgeGhTMHla0Ug0xSPeiZd8z5rypTtwyg3q_tMGXlq3fbKp3fG0Lp4XqUQ0RFmliTQJOpNb98NCF0TIHGEjJw37gc=s1360-w1360h1020-rw](https://lh3.googleusercontent.com/gps-cs-s/APNQkAGthdIPg67-vwa8RfQbEA_H33k7H4C2kM8g4dZ4DWCElyp_YgeGhTMHla0Ug0xSPeiZd8z5rypTtwyg3q_tMGXlq3fbKp3fG0Lp4XqUQ0RFmliTQJOpNb98NCF0TIHGEjJw37gc=s1360-w1360h1020-rw)

The Gajan sannyasis play a vital role in the festival, they took the Sannyas (renunciation) temporarily for a short period (vow period) lasting from two to seven days unlike the other Hindu sannyasa tradition which practices lifelong renunciation. Through this particular processual nature of the festival the practitioners are allowed towards receiving spiritual transcendence without bifurcating the social integrity and solidarity.

Main Rituals of the Shiva Gajan Festival:

1) Upos (Fasting Day): A temporary stoppage on consuming food and water.



- 2) Habisshi Day: Rice cooked with vegetables without oil and spices is consumed by the ascetic which cooked in Malsa (earthen pot) and this cooking is done separately. The initiation is received by the ascetics on this day. They wear the sacred thread around their body or neck.
- 3) Maha Habisshi: The third and the most intense day of fasting.
- 4) Phala Utsav: Worship of Lord Shiva with fruits of the season. The ritual of Jhaap, that can be Boti Jhaap or Kaata Jhaap is being performed.
- 5) Neel Puja: Baan phora (body piercing and fire play) ritual is performed and the sacred marriage of Neelawati (Shiva and Parvati)



FIGURE:- 5 The ritual of fire play is being performed on the day of Neel puja.

SOURCE:- <https://lh3.googleusercontent.com/gps-cs->

[s/APNQkAEFUsnEzCMtEWdrnb7VzWaJTqld9SpwxRWIH2bF611wPtsXDqiglLMvFTtTXPLSIypTv7AtykbqhTG9DUquZivSpX6gVd4IN0fd7aJh8ITkJDQrHV1w1ORgmEL1JcvKkBHuFtnnvQ=s1360-w1360-h1020-rw](https://lh3.googleusercontent.com/APNQkAEFUsnEzCMtEWdrnb7VzWaJTqld9SpwxRWIH2bF611wPtsXDqiglLMvFTtTXPLSIypTv7AtykbqhTG9DUquZivSpX6gVd4IN0fd7aJh8ITkJDQrHV1w1ORgmEL1JcvKkBHuFtnnvQ=s1360-w1360-h1020-rw)



FIGURE:-6

SOURCE:-<https://lh3.googleusercontent.com/gps-cs->

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[Eq3xnC0BBkQEbUNHeG5BrITwB1MIs5Vn57G2CHKGfXKTTEgviFF2MBZXYNqulsbeysIo_nD-wSy6pDK=s1360-w1360-h1020-rw](https://lh3.googleusercontent.com/gps-cs-Eq3xnC0BBkQEbUNHeG5BrITwB1MIs5Vn57G2CHKGfXKTTEgviFF2MBZXYNqulsbeysIo_nD-wSy6pDK=s1360-w1360-h1020-rw)

6) Charak Puja: The last day which is followed by charak puja and hook swinging.

THE WORSHIP OF THE DIFFERENT STAGES OF FEMALE'S LIFE: AN APPROACH TOWARDS THE INVOLVEMENT OF "FEMINITY"

There are two cultic approaches of Gajan festival which are the rural agrarian cult and the human fertility cult. The Mother earth/soil is being worshipped which represents both the "fertility" and "harvest". The female characteristics are being portrayed through the cultic enactments and which represents feminine nature of being fertile. The different stages of the Earth as a female/mother, like virginity, pregnancy, childbirth, menopause, are brought in correlation with the four stages agricultural process such as ploughing, seeding, harvesting, stasis and nurturing. By the act of piercing they penetrate the human body



which represents ploughing the soil. Hook swinging represents the pregnant woman (seeding in agro-fertility) and delivering (harvesting in the agrarian cult). The kata-jhaap and boti-jhaap psychologically represents the cultural value of blood which can also be correlated with the idea of menstruation which is a regenerative female power and it also purifies the body of a woman. (Dutta, 'Becoming Someone Else': Formation of Identities and Representations in the Folk Rituals of Hook Swinging (Gajan) Festival , 2022)

CONCLUSION

The Gajan festival on the whole is a festival which circulates around the way of life of the people belonging to the underprivileged sections of the society. This festival portrays the amalgamation of multiple faiths and beliefs for example the practice of self-mortification finds the relevance in Jainism, the austere practices find the collaboration with the scriptural Hinduism, the scourging is quite relatable to Christianity and the whipping of bodies is visible in the rituals of Muharram. Some scholarly works also argues that after the decline of Buddhism in Bengal, many Buddhists got assimilated to Hindu Shaivite groups. Because the significance of asceticism, bodily discipline and the practice of renunciation closely related the Vajrayana Buddhist practices. (Ghosh, December 2025)

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